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ビブリア古書堂の事件手帖

～栞子さんと奇妙な客人たち～

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～栞子さんと奇妙な客人たち～
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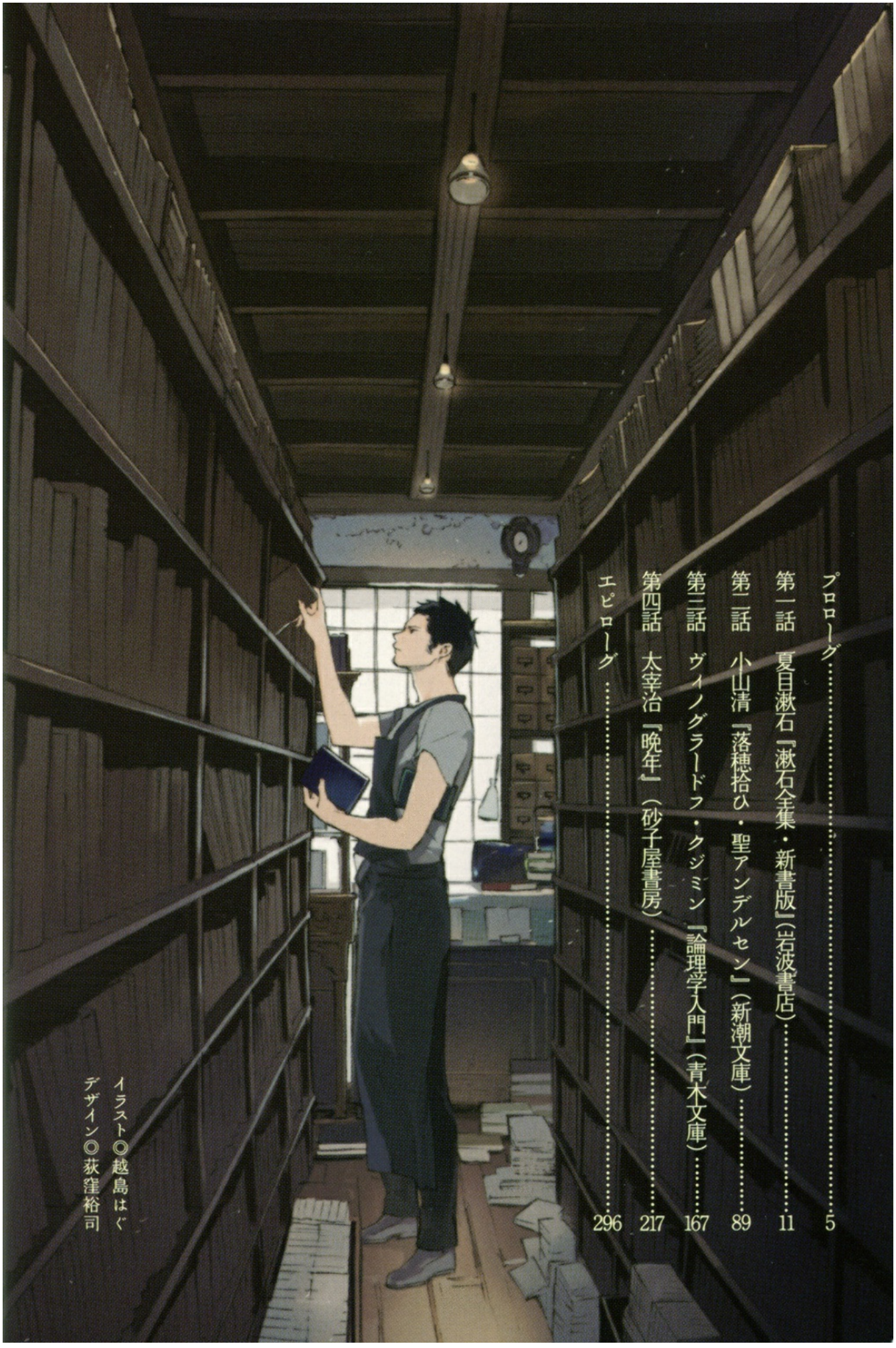

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Prologue

On that day six years ago, I walked down the slopes of Kita-Kamakura, strolling through the narrow alley by the railway.

Being soaked in sweat, my white half-sleeved shirt was sticking to my back. The annoying chirping of the cicadas rang in my ears without stopping, and hydrangeas could be seen everywhere. However, it was already summer before they wilted, after the rainy season ended.

Other than for the surfer hobbyists, this was not a season the locals particularly liked. Though the beaches of Yuigahama and Enoshima were already open to the public, the middle and high-school students here did not really want to play on the beaches nearby—because of the large number of tourists and the strange corroded color found in the waters when the tide rose.

I was a second-year high-school student attending the prefectural high school situated on the mountainside. It was a Sunday, but I had to go to school to retrieve a textbook I forgot to take back, and was just on my way home. I missed the bus that would arrive once every hour, and thus had to make my way to the JR station despite being used to take it to go to from home to school. or vice-versa. Kamakura was surrounded by mountains, and the roads here were narrow, which made certain areas incredibly inconvenient for transportation.

I could see the platform of Kita-Kamakura Station to my right. It was really long, and since the ticket gate was located on only one side, I had to take a long walk before I could enter the station.

There were rows of old residences on my left, and the trees that were planted in their courtyards were huge, bringing about an exuberant amount of green.

Not a lot of people might know of this, or maybe they would not care about it even if they did—but there was a second-hand bookstore located along this alley.

This wooden house had been around for many years, but never had a shop name put up. There was, at the shop entrance, merely an old signboard dangling with the breeze on which the words "Acquisition of old books, providing honest valuation" inscribed with a flamboyant handwriting. It could not spin much though, probably due to its rust.

I was about to pass by that bookstore whose name I did not know.

However, something unexpected happened then. The timber-framed sliding door creaked open, and a young woman stepped out.

She was dressed in a set of plain clothes that included a white sleeveless blouse as well as a long navy-blue skirt. Her long hair was braided behind her neck, her white tender skin complimented her large dazzling black eyes, and there was a pair of thin lips below her nose.

She was probably a little older than me, looked different from anyone whom I knew, and was honestly a pretty person who would cause passersby to stop and look at her again. She however seemed demure, with her lips pursed out like a little bird's beak as she made a strange, hoarse sound.

"Su— Susu— Su—"

It took me a while before I managed to realize that she was trying to whistle. Perhaps she was a clumsy person.

She pulled out a small cart from the old one-storeyed wooden house, and seeming ostensibly like an employee of this second-hand bookstore that was getting ready for its opening.

She did not stop to glance at me, who was standing still beside her, as she was focused on pushing the cart to its destination. through the corner of her eyes. A wooden plank with the sloppy handwriting of words "A hundred yen each" was set on this cart, which was probably used to display books at discounted prices.

She was about to head back into the shop, but then suddenly laid her eyes upon the signboard. She let out a soft sound—"Eh?"—and nudged the metal plate which spun with a creaking sound. It stopped when the back side of the "Acquisition of old books, providing honest valuation" signboard was facing the street.

Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia

I thought for a moment and realized that it was most likely the name of the shop. It was not a nameless shop. She walked back into the shop with a bounce in each of her steps, and until the end, she never noticed me.

Who is she?

I remembered that the shop was run single-handedly by a middle-aged man with greying hair. Did he hire a college student?

I made my way to the *Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia* tentatively, and peeked into the dimly-lit shop through the glass panel of the sliding door. There was a cashier counter, opposite the bookshelf, stacked with tall piles of books. I could see her behind them through the gaps. The girl was ostensibly buried within the books as she read through a very large one. I could see from my position that her eyes beneath the spectacles were wide open, sparkling with brilliance. There were moments when she chuckled, when she nodded her head hard, as she never remained still.

She really loves to read.

I suppose that would be the meaning of losing yourself. Her actions might seem a little eccentric, but it was the first time I had seen

someone reading books in such an engrossed manner. I could be said to be extremely envious. What was she reading? What was so interesting about it?

I placed my hand on the sliding door, but lost strength before I could open it. What was the point of asking her those questions? I have no affinity for reading at all…the reason being the ‘nature' within me. Depressed, I left the entrance of the bookstore and trudged my way towards the station.

Her silhouette, which I saw in the dim bookstore, was etched deep in my memory like a painting. There were several instances on which I wanted to turn back and return to that shop as I made my way past the ticketing gates and onto the platform, just so I could talk with her. That however did not happen.

I took the Yokosuka line to return home.

I did not feel that I did not do anything that would make her chuckle. Those that could seize the chance of an encounter were talented, and an ordinary person would most likely let it slip by. I merely did a normal thing, just like an ordinary person.

But even at this point, there were moments when I said to myself — What would have happened if I entered the shop and acquainted myself with her? Perhaps my life would be different because of this turning point.

Well, such presumptions were meaningless. They would be endless if I continued to dwell on it.

Allow me to bring us out of this prologue.

This is a story involving old books. This would include the old books themselves, as well as the stories of the people involved.

The books handed down not only included the original stories, but also their own stories. Even if one of them was traded, this line would still hold truth. Plus, if I could, I would add that not all ‘stories’ were wonderful. Some might be so heinously ugly that no one would want to face, but they were just like everything else that existed in this world.

My name is Daisuke Goura. I am 23 this year. The old books related to me—were none other than *Sōseki's Complete Collection*.

Well then, please allow me to tell you my story.

</noinclude>

Chapter 1 - Sōseki Natsume "Sōseki's Complete Collection, New Edition" (Iwanami Shoten)

第一話　夏目漱石『漱石全集・新書版』（岩波書店）

I was bad at reading books ever since I was young.

Of course, books that were typed out were even more of a no-go for me. After a long time of flipping through the pages and reading every single word, I would feel extremely frustrated for some reason. My heart would scream loudly as it beat, my palms would be moist, and in the end, my mood would go bad. I might say that I was a bibliophobic..

Thus, I suffered a lot in school. No matter what kind of subject, there were always textbooks with printed words on them. It was alright when I had to take notes during lessons, but my English and Modern Language grades were horrible since I had to memorize them. I could feel the hairs on my neck stand whenever I hear the term 'Reading Comprehension'.

I told my mother and my teachers about this, but all I got was some encouragement as they told me that it could not be helped that I hated books. It was natural for people to have their own strengths and weaknesses, so I did not have to worry too much.

I was really grateful for their words, but it was a complete misunderstanding of my problem. I do not hate reading books, but I just cannot read on even if I wanted to. Whenever I read, my body would start to resist.

Part of the reason why this misunderstanding was never cleared was because I was bad at explaining, and more importantly, because I looked as if I had no relations with reading at all. Whenever I went, my large, tall figure and my muscular body just looked so outstanding. Anyone who saw me would think that I was a physical-type. I was always chosen to take part in games meet and sports festivals, and I would often be invited to join sports clubs.

However, I had no real interest in sports. I wanted to read. I often took up the role of a library committee member, and did not feel that it was tedious to tidy up the library books as everyone thought. At that time, I enjoyed staring at the spines of the books from one end of the bookshelf. There was no problem if I did not open the pages, but imagined it.

By the way, this 'nature' did not come naturally. There is a cause behind this thinking. It is a story about *Sōseki's Complete Collection*, and a prelude to my story.

It was something that happened before I entered primary school. On a soppy day in spring, I was reading alone in the guest room on the second floor.

I suppose I should introduce my home.

My home is located in Ōfuna, a place located right between Yokohama City and Kamakura City, and was a must-see tourist spot for those riding the East Japan Railway Company line from Tokyo.

There was a large Guanyin statue[1] on the hill near Ōfuna station. It looked very impressive when lit by light, but the white face that protruded between the trees was somewhat scary. However, except for this Guanyin watching over the land 24 hours a day, it was a rather plain town.

In the past, there used to be another treasured attraction other than the Guanyin statue. It was the cinematography studio, one of the rare few in Japan. It was abandoned when I went to middle school, but I would often hear my grandmother mention about it. It once supported the Golden Age of Japanese cinematography, but I did not know anything about it as I was not familiar with movies.

The "Goura Eatery" located beside the cinematography studio was my house, and my family's specialty dish was very ordinary: katsudon with green peas and pickles.

My great grandfather was the one who opened this eatery, and my grandmother took over afterwards. The staff from the studio would come over here in the past, and our shop was bustling with business, but after I grew up, not many customers who came by to our shop.

It was not because the shop had bad ratings, but because the number of workers there decreased as the number of films taken at the cinematography studio decreased. Grandmother fired her staff and started to run the shop alone.

We stayed at the second level of this eatery, and the ones living here were my grandmother, my mother and I. My father had died before I was born, and my mother bore me when she returned back to her hometown. On a side note, my grandmother was the one who gave me the name "Daisuke".

As my mother worked at a food company in Yokohama, my grandmother was in charge of my upbringing. She would make 10 lectures for every single mistake I made, ranging from day-to-day chores to the bow angle. As the only grandchild, I did not remember being pampered before.

My grandmother had an ample chin, and looked rather kind, but her stare was exceptionally sharp like Guanyin on the hill.

Anyway, it was just like what was written. That day, I went to the living room on the second floor to look for picture books. I remembered that the book was “Guri and Gura”, and until that point, I was still an obedient child who loved to read books. I not only read picture books, but also a few children books that had furigana on the titles, and I remembered that I would harass the adults to buy me some new books whenever we went to the bookshop.

I got tired of reading all the books at home, and I was feeling bored. Lunchtime was ending, and there were the sounds of the customers chatting away and the television downstairs. I wanted to go outside, but I could not do so as it was raining outside.

I walked out of the living room and went towards my grandmother’s room at the end of the corridor. It was a Japanese-styled room facing the north, the room was cramped, and the ceiling was extraordinarily short. Our house went through many building extensions, so the layout of the rooms was somewhat weird.

My grandmother told me not to enter her room whenever I wanted to, but I had an objective in doing so—to look for books.

There was a large bookshelf at a wall of this Japanese-styled room, and naturally, grandmother’s books were laid on it. It seemed that my

Guanyin Bodhisattva-like grandmother was once a lovely literature girl, and I heard that she spent almost all the pocket money she earned working at the restaurant on books.

The books grandmother collected were mostly the old Japanese literature texts from the Meiji and the Taisho era, and the me of that time did not understand the contents of the books. But with so many books, I thought that there might be books for children. Thus, I arrived here, filled with expectations.

I continued to pull books out, checking the contents inside. At that time, I did not understand kanji, and I left the books aside on the floor without putting them back before drawing the next book. In the end, I did not know whether I was finding a book or making a mess.

Once I created openings all over the bookshelf, I noticed a box at the lowest level filled with pocket books. As they were small, I thought that they might be children books, and brought my face closer to read. The name was printed at the back, but unfortunately, they were mostly kanji, and there was only a book with hiragana on it. I slowly read this line,

“And, then.”

What kind of book was it? Just when I was about to pull the stack out from the shelf,

“What are you doing?”

A deep voice bellowed from above my head, shocking me. I looked back and saw my grandmother, wearing her cooking clothes as she lowered her head at me. When did she come up to the second level? The long narrow eyes that were reminiscent of Guanyin Bodhisattva[2] really scared me.

I sat down on the tatami mat that was covered with many books.

I immediately recalled the latter half of the line when my grandmother warned me not to enter her room—even if you enter, you are not allowed to touch the books on the shelf. Those are the things I treasured most.

At this moment, I knew what I had to do. My grandmother was strict, but I would be forgiven if I apologized sincerely. That was the case when I lined up the chairs in the eatery as a tunnel. I sat properly in a seiza and lowered my head, apologizing—

But grandmother’s reaction was beyond my expectations. She grabbed my shoulders violently and slapped me twice while I was completely shocked. She was completely merciless as she used the strength of an adult. My elbows and thighs slammed into the pile of books, and I was lifted up before I could cry. It was really horrifying to see the angry Sanpaku eyes of Guanyin Bodhisattva, and I nearly pissed myself there. That was the first and last time I got beaten up by grandmother.

“…You are not allowed to read these books.”

Grandmother said hoarsely, and added on,

“If you make the same mistake again, you’re no longer a child from our house.”

I nodded my head lightly in silence.

To be honest, as to whether this incident caused this kind of ‘nature’ within me, I cannot conclude as I am not a psychologist. It was only when I became an adult that I thought of this as a plausible reason.

It is clear however that I could not read printed text ever since I incurred the imperial wrath from my grandmother. Naturally, I never entered her room ever since that incident.

I did not know when my grandmother first noticed my change. However, we never talked about that incident after so many years. Perhaps it was a painful memory for my grandmother as well.

It was more than 15 years later that we talked again about what happened that day. When I went to visit my grandmother, who was admitted into a nearby hospital, “about the time when I beat you.” she suddenly started to talk about it,

“I was really shocked to see you in my room that that time. You never entered before that, right?”

Her tone sounded like it happened the previous week, and it took me a while to digest the words and understand what she was talking about.

At this point, both of us were different from before; both my grandmother who spoke up, and I, who listened. I grew taller than an ordinary person and went through my coming of age, while my already-short grandmother became a lot thinner and frail, and after her body condition started to worsen, the number of times the shop closed down for breaks started to increase.

At that time, we were headed into the rainy season, and the rain poured down outside. Whenever the seasons changed, my grandmother’s migraine would start to work up, bothering her. However, since she showed no signs of recovering, she was admitted into hospital for a checkup. I was at my busiest, looking for a job at that time, and after hearing the company’s briefing, I went to the hospital for a visit. I inadvertently felt somewhat inexplicable that I would be talking about what happened when I was 5 while dressed in a suit.

“I never thought of hitting you at first. That was my fault at that time, I suppose.”

I stared at the clarity that could be seen in my grandmother’s eyes, and felt that the atmosphere was somewhat bad.

“It was my fault for entering on my own in the first place. Don’t fret over it.”

I did not begrudge her for this. That was the first and last time she ever hit me, but she still showed a gloomy expression as she said.

“I often thought that if you can read books now, your life will be changed greatly.”

I used my fingers to rub my eyebrows lightly. That perhaps might be the case. During university, I gave up my insistence on reading books and accepted an invitation to the judo club. During those 4 years, I attained a respectable Dan [3]ranking and was ranked one of the top in the district’s weight-division tournament. I supposed, during that time, I got stronger, the areas around my neck and my shoulders got sturdy, and I built up on my physique.

“…It doesn’t matter even if I can’t read books now.”

Right, that was what I said, but it was also half the truth. My university life was definitely more fulfilling—but if I could read books, it would definitely be a lot different.

“Is that so?”

Grandmother sighed as she closed her eyes. I thought that she was going to sleep, and after a while, she started to talk,

“…What kind of person will you be married to?”

“Huh?”

The sudden change in topic caused me to be taken aback. It was the same as when she talked about me, and she had been saying some strange words I could not comprehend. This situation just felt too weird.

“It’s too early to talk about marriage.”

I said that as I looked outside the ajar door. If there was a nurse passing through, it would be good if I call her in.

“Maybe it might be good for you to get married to a lady who likes books. You can’t read books, but she’ll definitely tell you all sorts of interesting things regarding them…well, it’s kind of difficult since bookworms mostly like those who share the same interest.”

Grandmother said that in a teasing manner. I did not know if she was just joking, or if her consciousness was fading off to a weird place. Then, she seemed to remember something as she added,

“…Once I die, I’ll leave all my books to you two to handle as you please.”

I felt like my face was splashed with cold water, and I was not a person who could pretend to remain calm and adapt quickly.

“Wha-what are you saying…isn’t that too early?”

I muttered softly.

My grandfather and my father died before I was born, and this was the first time I actually heard a kin of mine say such things. Grandmother closed her eyes as she gave a wry smile. It seemed that she could detect the anxiety in me that was expressing itself clearly.

She had a malignant tumor in her brain, and there was not much time left before she died. I did not tell her the results of the detailed examination, but she probably knew from the attitudes my mother and I showed. This was not going to fool the eyes of Guanyin Bodhisattva.

I finally understood what my grandmother was trying to tell me.

Those were words she wanted to tell her grandson beforehand—her last words.

By the time I recalled about my grandmother’s books, it was more than a year after the funeral—during the midsummer of August 2010. Having graduated from university, I continued to stay at my house in Ōfuna, and as I finally managed to get out of bed at noon, I heard my mother yelling for me outside the house.

“Come down here, Joblessuke.”

I felt puzzled as to why my mother, who would normally be working at the company at this time, was in the house. I then remembered that it was Sunday, and honestly, I cannot seem to determine when its Sunday ever since I graduated.

I yawned as I walked out of the room, and saw that the door at the end of the corridor was opened. It seemed that mom was in grandmother’s Japanese-styled room.

“Ow.”

My forehead hit the door frame hard as I was about to enter. The beam then let out a creaking sound.

“What are you doing, Joblessuke. Stop wrecking the house.”

Mom grumbled as she stood in the middle of the room. Her head was nearly hitting the lampshade of the fluorescent light, and though she is not as tall as me, she is still rather tall.

“The doorframe here is really low.”

I press my head as I argue back. I did mention before that due to the many expansions in the house, the layout of the rooms everywhere has become a little weird. Though it looks like it is lower by a mere few centimeters, this slight difference is still noticeable.

“You’re still not awake yet. Nobody else has knocked into that before.”

I don't think so. There is black duct tape fastened to the door frame, and it was there before I was wise enough. Someone definitely knocked into it before, and it is really depressing to think that I'm the only one who had been careless.

"I'm now clearing up the stuff your grandmother left behind…"

She spoke halfway, and then paused, seemingly sighing.

"…Ah seriously, it's troublesome to have two tall people inside here. Come sit down."

I was prompted to sit down cross-legged as I faced mom, who was sitting in a Seiza. She has a wide chin, long narrow eyes, and would say such cruel words with a calm unflinching face. Height aside, she is basically a chip off the old block when compared to my grandmother. Mom has two older sisters—my aunts, and she resembles my grandmother most amongst the three sisters.

However, she does not seem like she is happy with inheriting such aspects from her mother, and she is probably fuming because they looked identical. I have never seen mom talk with grandmother calmly for more than 5 minutes, and she probably went out to work instead of taking over "Goura Eatery" because she wanted to avoid meeting each other too much.

"The one year anniversary of your grandmother's death has passed. I'm wondering if I should pack things up."

She said. It is just like what my mother said; we have lots of folded cardboard boxes gathered below our waists. My grandmother's clothes and ornaments were already divided amongst our aunts, and the only things left in this house were untouched. This messy scene caused me to recall the incident when I was 5 years ago. I decided to look around the room in order to change my mood, but suddenly, I noticed an important change.

"Where are grandmother's books?"

The bookshelf that filled the wall completely was left empty, and not a single book was left behind.

"The books are over there. I did say that I'm clearing them up, didn't I? Weren't you listening to me?"

Mom grumbled as she knocked on a few boxes beside her.

"Isn't there a nursing home near the Sekiya Intersection? I know of some acquaintance working there, building some reading room there, and is collecting books recently. He was delighted when I offered him the books in our house, saying that he wants as many as he can get. I told him that I'll send over our jobless-suke slacking at home then."

"Why are you calling me that when talking to outsiders?"

Of course, this jobless-suke here will refer to me. The –suke in my Daisuke is added on with a 'jobless', and she actually calls me by this nickname in front of everyone else.

"This is a face after all. You're really slacking at home without working anyway."

"…It's not like I wanted to slack around like this either."

I still have not found a job. I once received a job offer from a construction company in Yokohama, but that company closed down during February this year. Currently, I am still attending some inauguration exercises, but I just could not get through to the interview stage. I am not a student of some famous and prestigious university, and I have no real noted specialty other than my physique. The economy downtime too is making it more difficult for me to find job opportunities.

"You're being too picky here. Try taking the acceptance tests of the JSDF or the police then. You do inherit the good physique from me, so it's probably good if you can actually show these advantages."

I did not answer. This isn't the first time I'm advised to take the acceptance tests of the JSDF and the police. My judo dan ranking is definitely a plus here, but after 4 years of judo training, I clearly understood that fighting to win isn't a characteristic I have. I don't feel that physical jobs are really tiring, but I actually want a simpler job instead of having to ensure the safety of the people and the peace in the country.

"Then, regarding the books."

I changed the topic and temporarily pushed this public servant talk to the back of my head.

"Grandmother really treasures these books. There's no need to actually donate them all…"

"It's fine."

Mom concluded.

"She had already said 'I'll leave my books to you once I die'. Didn't you hear her?"

"I did, but I feel that she wants us to keep them in an appropriate manner."

I thought grandmother meant that while we were free to share them, she hoped that we set them aside and cherish them. However, mom merely shook her head hard.

"Do you still not understand? Her catchphrase is basically 'nothing can be brought over to that word'. It was the same too when your grandfather died; she just dealt with all the leftovers without hesitation. She's someone with this kind of mindset."

Speaking of which, I did not remember grandmother leaving any things grandfather left behind. Grandfather died a long time ago, and I heard it was when mom first entered elementary school. He got into a traffic accident on a hot summer day no different from how it's like

now, when he was returning from the Kawasaki Daishi.[4]

“It’s a different situation altogether if only you can read books, right?”

No, I won’t read, or more specifically, I can’t read. They’re just left in my house as displays anyway. It might be good to give them to someone who reads.

“Then, how about I drive and deliver these books?”

I quickly looked around the room. The books from the bookshelves were not in cardboard boxes, but were scattered on the tatami. I had to first store them in the cardboard boxes.

“So be it then. But before you leave, there’s something I want to discuss with you.”

Mom took out a set of books from beside her, and put it in front of my eyes. There were approximately 30 books in total, and they were small and thin compared to the others, the size of a single young boys manga volume. I felt as if I pricked a barb as the bad memories awoken in me again. Those were definitely the books I wanted to take back then, but this was the first time I noticed the name of the book set *Sōseki's Complete Collection*. This set included the ‘And Then’ book of Sōseki Natsume.

“I thought she might had some personal savings she left in the books and forgot, so I flipped them open one by one.”

So that was what she was doing. Mom ignored my surprise, took out a book from the case with the words ‘8th volume: And Then’ printed on it, and showed me the inner lining paper wrapped over it.

“See, I found this.”

There was a thin line of handwritten brushstrokes on the right side of the blank space. The words weren’t really elegant, and the balance and spacing between each letter was delicately weird:

“Sōseki Natsume.

To Mr Yoshio Tanaka”

There was a thin line of handwritten brush words on the right side of the blank space. The words were not really elegant, and the balance and spacing between each letter was delicately weird:

These were the only two lines written. ‘Sōseki Natsume’ was written right in the middle, while the ‘To Mr Yoshio Tanaka’ was near the filing.

“This is Sōseki Natsume’s signature, right? It’ll be really amazing if it’s the real thing!”

Mom’s eyes were dazzling, but I just couldn’t summon the enthusiasm. It would be really amazing if it was the real thing, but it’s nothing if it’s just a fake.

I received the book, flipped it open, and the stench of old paper came at me. I felt the area around my heart start to cool down the moment I saw printed words lined by the side; I frantically flipped to the last page, and found the publishing date at the top edge. The date was the 31st year of the Showa Era, July 27th, and the distributor was ‘Iwanami Shoten’.

“…It’s the year before grandmother got married.”

I was puzzled. Was Sōseki Natsume still alive at that time? I thought that he was someone who lived a long time ago.

“Who’s the person called Tanaka?”

My grandmother’s name was Kinuko Goura, a completely different name. if Sōseki Natsume really signed for this person, why did these books end up in grandmother’s hands?

“I don’t know either. Maybe it’s a signature the owner before your grandmother wanted. This book looks like it’s bought from an old book store.”

Mom reached her hand out and flipped through the pages. There was a bookmark the size of business cards placed inside, and it seemed to be the price of this entire collection. The writing was a little faded, but the words were, ’34 volumes, first edition, 3500 Yen’. I’m not too sure of the prices in the past, but if it’s a book collection, wasn’t this price too cheap. If it was something someone wrote as a prank—

I gasped.

Upon looking at it, I found that there was a *Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia* line printed at the corner of the price card. My mind immediately thought of that beautiful profile reading inside the slightly dim shop. It was the bookshop near the High School I studied at.

“I want to know how much worth does this whole collection has. If it’s a memorabilia, it’ll be a waste to give it away like this; it’ll be better to keep it at home. I don’t know of anyone who knows anything about such things, do you?”

I got off my scooter near the Kita-Kamakura Station, and put my helmet under the seat.

I took out the shopping bag with the *Sōseki's Complete Collection* from the basket at the front of the scooter. After many years, I stood in front

of the *Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia*. The surroundings had not changed since my time in High School, just like how I was. There was a narrow alley vehicles could not drive into, an old wooden house, a rusted swinging display, and not many pedestrians at all.

This shop was probably around since my grandmother's youth. It should be impossible for the daughter of a diner family to save enough pocket money and buy new books. She was able to collect so many books because she could get them cheaply at old book stores like this, and this was a natural conclusion I could derive as I thought about this.

I came here to let the owner of the shop appraise the *Sōseki's Complete Collection*, and to ask if my grandmother really came to this shop. Also, I was a little upbeat about hearing some news regarding the beauty I saw during my second year in High School.

6 years after that day, I would look into the shop whenever I passed by, but I would only see the white-haired shopkeeper glower as he continued to walk. It was a little awkward to go in and ask about her for no good reason; since I had some proper business to deal with today, it should be fine to hear some news about her.

The sliding door of the old book store had the 'we are open' board hanging on it. I glanced inside, and found it to be the same as how it was in the past. There were several large bookshelves, and there was a counter opposite.

Someone was sitting behind the counter.

It was not the aloof looking shop owner, but probably a young petite female. She had her head lowered, so I could not see her face. I felt my body heating up, thinking that she might be the one I saw back then. Before I realized it, I opened the sliding door, causing it to make a sound.

The shop attendant lifted her face, and the surging temperature rising in me cooled a little. Her wide eyes under the short fringe, and her skin was tanned like an elementary school student in summer break; she was dressed in a white shirt similar to that of a High School uniform, and was different from the girl back then. She's a different person.

A high schooler working part time--no, perhaps she was the daughter of the shop owner, since their faces had a canny resemblance. She looked over at the paper bag in my hands.

"Ah, are you here to buy old books?"

She welcomed me in with a very lively voice. I was not here to buy or sell books, but just to appraise the value of the complete collection with the signature on it. Perhaps I might be thick-skinned about this.

But at this point, it will be awkward to return back. I decided to ask her first anyway.

There were a lot of books on the aisles between the bookshelves, and it was impossible for me to pass through with my size. It was practically impossible to take the books at the bottom; how is a customer supposed to buy books anyway?

The girl stood up from behind the counter. She seemed to be my junior, and her blouse and skirt were from my alma mater. Since she's dressed in school uniform even in the middle of summer vacation, it seems that she had club activity training in the morning.

"...I'm not here to buy old books, but to ask you to help me check something. May I? It's about the books my grandmother bought from this shop."

I peeked over at the girl's reaction for a moment, and she simply waited quietly for me to continue. I put the paper bag with the *Sōseki's Complete Collection* on the table, and took out the '8th volume: And Then' book. I removed the book from its cover and showed the lining paper to the girl. She narrowed her eyes as she brought her face here.

"It's this signature."

"Wow! It's written as Sōseki Natsume! Is this the real thing?"

For an instant, I did not know how I should respond. I never thought that she would be asking me in return.

"I don't know at all. This is why I'm here."

"I see...hm, what shall I do?"

She folded her arms as she looked up at my face. Why is it that she's the one asking me now?

"...You can't tell if this is the real thing?"

"Ah, it's impossible now. The shopkeeper's not here, and I'm not certain about such things."

She said without hesitation?

"When will the shopkeeper be back?"

The moment I asked, the girl gave a frown, and her eyebrows were touching each other.

"...The shopkeeper's hospitalized at the moment."

She lowered her voice a little. Speaking of which, this shop did seem to be closed for the moment. Perhaps the shopkeeper was not feeling too well.

"Is he sick?"

"No...well, the leg got injured...if there are books sent here, I will have to bring it to the hospital for the owner to appraise it. Ah seriously,

it's really troublesome!"

The explanation instantly became a rambling, but I was a little shocked to learn that the owner was still working even when hospitalized. Is the old book shop still in operation under such situations?

"But it's at the Ōfuna General Hospital, so it's not too far. It's a 15 minute ride on a bicycle from here."

"...Ah, so it's there."

I could not help but mutter. It was near my house, and whenever a hospital was mentioned, I would immediately think of the Ōfuna General Hospital. That was the place where my mother gave birth to me, and where my grandmother died.

"Anyway, just leave them here for the time being. I still have club activities in the summer, and I don't know if I can go over to the hospital immediately. Will you be fine with it if this takes quite a while?"

I thought about it for a little. It was too troublesome to deliberately ask her to send the books over to the hospital. I would 'not be selling them if they were the real thing', and it would be bothersome to her if she was to bring them back. The moment I was about to say this, she spoke up first,

"Erm, do you often go to the Ōfuna General Hospital?"

"...It's near my house."

Her expression immediately brighened.

"In that case, can you please head to the hospital on your own? I'll contact the owner first, and the appraisal can be done for you immediately."

"Eh?"

I never heard of anyone going to a hospital to appraise old books, and most important, this shop would not gain a profit because of it. That scary looking shop owner might even throw a fit.

"No...it'll be too troublesome though..."

She did not hear my words at all, and had already opened her phone, and quickly typed out a message. In an instant, she sent it out, and when she closed her phone she bared her teeth as she grinned at me.

"The mail's sent! Now you can head over there whenever you want to."

At this point, there was no way I could refuse. I could only nod my head in silence.

Approximately 15 minutes after that, I reached the parking lot of the Ōfuna General Hospital.

The white 6 leveled building was dazzling under the sunshine of midsummer. This hospital became the largest in the area ever since it was refurbished 10 years ago. There was a wide courtyard in front of the entrance, but there were no signs of any hospitalized patients on the walkways or the benches, merely the sounds of crickets echoing.

I carried the paper bag with the *Sōseki's Complete Collection* in my hands, passed through the automatic doors, and entered the building. The air-conditioned hall was filled with outpatients.

I wondered why I came here as I went up to the stairs leading to the surgical ward. This was the first time I came here since the moment when I came to claim my grandmother's corpse.

Grandmother went to the other world a month after that conversation. Once she got the formal notice, she said that she wanted to go to the Kusatsu Onsen resort as her final memory. Her condition was still rather stable, and since it was her wish, the attending doctor gave his permission.

With the company of my mother and I, she was very energetic and enjoyed her onsen trip thoroughly. It seemed that even her little quibbles with my mother were rather delightful, and she did not resemble an ill person at all. However, a week after we returned home to Ōfuna, she fainted and died without regaining consciousness. Her life went out like a flame on a candlewick, ostensibly planned, and our relatives were inadvertently shocked before they felt anguish.

I recorded my name on the nurse duty book, and went to the patient room the girl told me to go to. Before I was mentally prepared, I found the room. I let out a soft sigh, prepared myself, and knocked on the door.

"Please excuse me."

There was no answer. I knocked on the door again, but there was no reply. I peered in through the little opening of the slightly ajar door.

At that moment, I was immediately stunned.

It was an elegant and bright single bed room. There was an adjustable hospital bed beside the window. The mattress at the middle bulk sank a little, and a long haired woman in cream-colored pajamas had her eyes closed.

She must have fallen asleep while reading. The opened book was resting her her knees, and there was a nice delicate bridge under the eyebrows, with a pair of thick-framed spectacles resting on it. Her lips were slightly opened, and her tenderness and beautiful face resembled that of someone--the person I saw in the Biblia Bookshop 6 years ago. her face was a little slimmer, but the other aspects had not changed much. The way she looked at this point was prettier.

There were stacks of old books lined all over the bed, and it looked like a mini street. She brought so many books over, but was not doing so to kill the time. Was she not told off by the hospital staff?

She suddenly woke up, rubbed her eyes, and looked over at me.

"...Aya?"

She said a name that was unfamiliar with me. Her voice was soft and clear, causing me to be taken aback. This was the first time I heard her name.

"Are the books here...?"

She seemed to have seen me as someone else, probably because she was not wearing her glasses. It would not be good to keep silent like this, and I forced a few coughs to clear the blockage feeling in my throat.

"...Good afternoon."

This time, I spoke clearly for her to hear. Her shoulders jumped in shock, and she reached to adjust her glasses. She then knocked into the book, and it dropped off from the bed.

Ah. There was a little cry.

I did not think too much and moved quickly. I leapt into the room and reached for the book I could barely get with one hand. It did not seem to be a really large book, but it was extremely heavy. There was a title printed on it, and the words 'Farewell, photoshooting. August 2nd, at the hotel on the top of the mountain.' filled the white cover. It seemed to be a little aged, and a side of the cover was raffled to the outside, a little black.

I felt that I did well, but upon lifting my head up, I found that she had her blanket lifted to her chest. Her hand was placed on the bedroom call button on the wall, and her widened eyes clearly showed a timid look. Anyone would be shock to see an unfamiliar muscular guy suddenly barge into the room like this, and I immediately stood up and pulled my distance away frantically.

"Sorry, I'm here to ask something about my grandmother's books. I went to the shop in Kita-Kamakura, and the girl there told me to come here...did you not receive the message?"

The hand that was about to press on the button stopped still. she looked back to see the notebook laptop placed on the side table, narrowed her eyes to look at the screen--and her face became flushed red after that.

"...Good grief."

Good grief? I looked at her doubtfully. She lowered her head deeply, and her beautiful hair was facing towards me. This was the first time I saw someone give me a look like that.

"S-sorry...erm, my little sister caused you...quite some trouble..."

She said with a barely audible voice, and stumbled somewhat in her words as her ears got redder.

"Sorry for, making you, come all the way here...I'm the owner of the *Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia*, Shioriko Shinokawa."

At this point, I finally realized what was going on. The girl in the shop just now was her little sister, and that girl said that she was going to send a mail. In other words, there was a switch of owners.

"The previous shop owner should be someone else, right? A man with some white hair."

"...That was my father..."

"Father?"

I asked, and she nodded.

"He died last year...and I took over this shop..."

"I see. My sympathies regarding your loss."

I bowed. Last year, one of my family members died too. I felt a closer bond to her.

"Thank you..."

The room immediately fell into silence. She averted her gaze at me, and merely looked at the area near my throat. She had an introverted and shy personality, completely different from what I expected; of course, she was still a beauty, but I just felt that I missed out a little. How is someone with this personality supposed to receive the customers? it's someone else's business, but I can't help but worry about this.

"Did you help take care of the shop in your father's place a few years ago?"

I said, and she stupefied.

"I occasionally passed by the shop during my High School days. The school was near there."

"Is-is that so...yes, I do once in a while..."

Her shoulders relaxed somewhat. It seemed that she had eased her guard against me somewhat now.

"Erm..."

She timidly reached her hand out. Does she want a handshake? I put the paper bag in doubt and wiped my sweaty hand off my jeans. Then, she said gently,

"...The books, thank you very much..."

I was completely mistaken. The moment she said this, I realized that I still had the 'Farewell, photoshooting' book.

"This one must have been expensive."

I handed the book over, and said this line to get rid of the awkwardness. She tilted the side of her head, and it certainly felt vague in which I could not ascertain if she was shaking it or nodding.

"This is the First Edition...but it isn't preserved too well...it's about 250,000 Yen."

"200..."

The calm reply surprised me somewhat. This dusty book? I did not think too much as I examined the cover again, but she did not continue with her explanation or anything. She carelessly put the 250,000 Yen book on the side table that casually, and reached her hand over to me again. Now, what reason will it be this time?

"...May I look at the books you are holding onto?"

I looked over at where she was looking, and realized it was the paper bag with the *Sōseki's Complete Collection*. I felt really bad for troubling people like this as I continued to trouble her like this. I licked my dry lips.

"Actually, I'm not here to sell them. When I was clearing through my grandmother's leftover stuff, I found a signature in this complete collection...it seems the series was bought from this shop a long time ago. Can you help me find out how much value does this have?"

If she showed even the slightest bit of hesitation, i would have brought the books back immediately.

However, Shioriko Shinokawa continued to stare at me like a completely changed person, and I felt a strong will in her eyes.

"Please let me see it."

She answered with a clear voice.

"Ah, it's the Iwanami Shoten New Edition."

She looked into the bag she received, and her eyes immediately showed a dazzling glow; she simply looked like a child opening a birthday present. She took out the volumes from the case, one by one, starting from the first volume, and flipped through them. The names of the works were printed on the spine, including stories like 'I am A Cat'[5] and 'Botchan' [6], and these were titles I was familiar with.

She continued to flip through the books, the smile on her lips intensifying as she proceeded. She would nod her head from time to time, narrow her eyes, or even make clumsy attempts to whistle, which I heard her do before. It seemed she had no realization of what she was doing, and it was probably a habit she had when she was too engrossed in the books.

(...Ah, this is the one.)

This was the expression etched in my memories, the expression of being too engrossed in reading to a point where she was enjoying herself. She continued to read on, and I pulled a round chair and sat down quietly.

She suddenly stopped whistling. The '8th Volume: And then' was placed on her lap. She lowered her head with a troubled look, and looked over at the signature on the paraffin cover, but merely gave it a glance. She started to flip through the pages again, and suddenly leaned towards the '34 volumes, first edition, 3500 Yen' label to inspect it closely. She seemed interested in the price for some reason.

Shinokawa placed the book with the signature on her knees and continued to look into the other books. Finally, she again flipped through the '8th volume: And then' meticulously.

"As expected."

She muttered softly, and lifted her head towards me.

"Sorry to keep you waiting for so long. I've a rough gist of what's going on."

"How is it?"

"Unfortunately, this signature is a fake."

She said in an apologetic manner, but I was not particularly surprised. I did have such suspcions before.

"So it's not the real thing?"

"Yes. The eras don't match at all. Sōseki Natsume died in the 5th year of the Taisho era, and this complete collection new edition was released in the 31st year of the Showa era...that will be 40 years later."

"40 years..."

There was no doubts as to whether it was authentic or not anymore. There was no way a deceased person could make a signature on an item published 40 years later.

"Then, are these books not expensive?"

"Yes...this collection is the cheap edition. It was reprinted a lot of times, and there are many of such collections in old book shops. However, the commentary is rich, and the packaging is very intricate. It is ordinary, but it's a fine book. I like it a lot."

She was speaking as if she was praising an old friend, and her expression and tone were completely devoid of the demure attitude she showed before. She looked calmer, and this was probably her natural personality.

"Iwanami Shoten was the publishing company that first published the *Sōseki's Complete Collection*. The founder Shigeo Iwanami had a close relationship with Sōseki, and often interacted with Sōseki's disciples. Together, they published the first complete collection, and after several years, they would make revised reprints. This cheaper edition isn't any inferior in quality. Sōseki's diary was first revealed to the public in this complete collection, and the commentaries for each volume in the complete series was added by Sōseki's disciple, Komiya Toyotaka."

There was no stagnation in her explanation. I was naturally absorbed in it the more I listened.

"Then, are there many editions of the Sōseki's Complete Collection?"

"Iwanami Shoten's not the only one; an assortment of publishers have published the series under this name. If we're to include suspended publishing prior to completion, there should be at least 30 editions."

"...That's incredible."

I inadvertently said it out as I thought.

"Isn't it? I think he might be the most beloved author in Japan."

Shioriko Shinokawa seemed to agree with me as she nodded. However, I was not simply complimenting the literary great, but how Shinokawa could rattle on with her explanations to me. I felt somewhat regretful and yet relieved that I could not express myself; my heart simply felt complicated.

I glanced at the '8th Volume: After then' that was left behind.

"Then, I suppose the signature on this book is simply some random doodle?"

This was the first time there was a pause since she was so quick in her responses.

"...You can look at it that way, I think..."

She looked extremely troubled, and her eyebrows were practically touching. I could not help but wonder what it was about.

"Is there something troubling you?"

"I don't suppose it's a big deal, but there's something I don't really understand...it may be rude of me to ask this, but was your grandmother who would leave marks on her books?"

"Eh? No, I guess not."

I shook my head. It was really hard to imagine that.

"She really treasured those books...and even forbade family members from touching them. She would be really furious if someone were to touch them accidentally."

Touching grandmother's books was a taboo in the family, and besides me, all our relatives knew of this. Even my mother, who was on bad terms with my grandmother, did not dare to this. There was no one else who really liked books at home, so nobody thought of touching her books anyway.

"I think this explanation might be plausible...but it would be a different story if she had written her own name..."

Shinokawa took out the '8th Volume: And Then' from the case and opened the cover. While sitting on the chair, I leaned forward and looked at the signature again.

“Sōseki Natsume.

To Mr Yoshio Tanaka”

The lines were rather fine as the brushstrokes were light, and on a closer look, it did look feminine. It was a handwriting that was not unique, and was easy to imitate, but this was certainly not grandmother's handwriting.

"Someone sold this complete collection to Biblia, and my grandmother bought them."

Upon hearing my words, she lifted her face away from the book.

"...So this is how it is?"

"Did the previous owner write it down? Or is it written by the person called 'Yoshio Tanaka'?"

"No, this doesn't seem to be the case."

She took out the book's price card and showed it to me. ’34 volumes, first edition, 3500 Yen’.

"This price card was used when my grandfather first opened Biblia. That was 45, 46 years ago."

In other words, grandmother bought the *Sōseki's Complete Collection* at that time. If we were to go by the Western Calendar, 45, 46 years ago would be--I could not calculate the numbers out of a sudden. Well, it's fine either way.

"This price card doesn't have the words 'there were words written on it'."

She pointed at the price card and said,

"If it was purchased from the old bookshop, we'll first check the condition of the books, as I did before this. It's normal to notice such words in conspicuous places, and we would write them on the price card to indicate this. Otherwise, there will be situation where customers who will demand for compensation."

"...Ah."

I see. At that point, I totally understood. It was weird not to have a note on the price card indicating that the book was 'vandalized'.

"Therefore, this book did not have the fake signature when your grandmother bought this collection from my family's shop."

I folded my arms. For some reason, this topic got weirder. If we were correct, the person who forged this signature would not exist. How could that be possible?"

"Ah..."

I suddenly thought of something.

"...Maybe grandfather wrote it."

"Your grandfather?"

"He died several decades ago, and I never met him. I think he accidentally touched grandmother's bookcase once, and they got into an argument..."

According to mom, grandfather was nearly chased out of the house that time. If he not only touched the book, but left some words on it--it would make sense why I was beaten up when I touched the book. Perhaps she recalled a painful memory in the past. 'If you make the same mistake again, you’re no longer a child from our house'. She probably remembered what grandfather did when she said those words.

"I really can't think of who else would do such a thing. Nobody dared to touch that bookshelf."

But Shinokawa shook her head slightly.

"I don't think this is the case."

"Eh?"

"I don't think it was done by any other family members...I think it was done by your grandmother."

She concluded.

"Why?"

I asked. How was it possible that she could conclude this so firmly?

"If it were someone else who scribbled on it, your grandmother would not leave the book like this. This book doesn't have any signs of any attempts to erase the words...even if it was difficult, it would be easy to buy another 8th volume to replace it. As I said, this book isn't expensive. There had been a lot of reprints, and they do sell them in the new bookstores for a long time."

"However...she did not seem to have left it alone like that. Maybe someone wrote on it, and she might not have realized it..."

I was tongue-tied as I spoke halfway through. That would be the least likely thing. The Guanyin Bodhisattva of the Goura family would never be this careless. If someone really touched the books in that room, she would definitely find out.

(...Did grandmother really write that?)

If that were the case, it would not be a simple doodle. Grandmother must have done it because of a reason. I frowned over this as I folded by elbows.

"There's something I'm also concerned about. It's about the price card..."

I was suddenly at a loss of words. I lifted my head, and Shinokawa looked at her knees in shock. Her long and beautiful black hair covered her face.

"...Well...I'm really sorry..."

She muttered softly, and reverted back to her attitude before she took out the *Sōseki's Complete Collection*. I had no idea what she was apologizing for.

"Eh? What is it?"

I asked.

"Anyway...sorry to trouble you..."

"Eh? Sorry, but can you please repeat that again?"

The voice was too soft, and I poked my head forward, but Shinokawa was almost at the point of retreating to the window. What was it that I did weird? While I wondered, her white throat throbbed, and she let out a weird voice.

"I...I only wanted to see if the signature was authentic...but, I got carried away and said a lot of things..."

I was beginning to feel even more confused.

"In-in the past, people said that...I-I just can't stop talking when it comes to books."

At this point, I noticed my profile reflected off the window. There was a muscular man sitting on a round chair, brooding, his eyebrows frown, his narrow and long eyes glaring sharply, and he was giving off a killing intent. I inadvertently revealed the stare of my grandmother, which I had inherited from while I was in deep thought.

"I-I'm really sorry for taking too much of your time..."

She said as she wanted to put the '8th Volume: And then' into the paper bag. Just when she was about to finish her words though...

"You aren't causing me any trouble!"

I then realized that I was too loud; this caused her to tremble in fright as even the paper bag and book dropped, and she flailed her arms around flusteredly. She managed to catch them before they dropped onto the floor, and heaved a sigh of relief, but upon realizing that I was staring at her, she covered her face in an embarrassed manner.

"...Please continue on with what you're saying."

This time, I deliberately spoke with a softer voice. She looked at me worriedly from behind the bag, and was practically a completely different person from how she was when she made her explanation so eloquently.

"When I was young, I had a bad memory about books, and I was unable to read them as a result. However, I always wanted to read books, so I'll be really happy if I hear about such things."

I inadvertently said this. Up till this point, nobody understood this 'nature' of mine. She widened her eyes at me, probably because she did not understand. Just when I was about to give up, she removed the bag from her face, and her wide black eyes were showing signs of life. It seemed like a switch was pressed as her attitude immediately changed.

"You can't read books because you were scolded by your grandmother?"

Her voice was clear and definitive. This time, I was the shocked one.

"How did you know?"

"Your grandmother seemed to be the kind of person who will be furious if anyone were to accidentally touch her bookshelf. But this 'nobody dared to touch it' probably would mean anyone other than her...from the way she became so angry over such a matter, I suppose it isn't surprising that you're at the point where you can't read books..."

I was at a loss of words. She was able to hit the bullseye so easily. It seemed that she was savvy as long as it was anything related to books.

I put my hands on my knees, and sat down again. I really wanted to hear her continue.

"I really love old books...I feel that books that are handed down have their own stories as well...and not simply the content of the stories within."

She paused and looked at me right in the eyes as if this was the first time she noticed my existence.

"...May I know what is your name?"

"Goura Daisuke."

"Mr Goura, actually, there is something else I'm concerned about."

I was inadvertently startled the moment I heard her call my name. It felt as if the distance between us was closed up.

She again handed me the price card with the words '34 volumes, first edition, 3500 Yen'.

"There is a 'stamp of ownership' written as part of this price card."

"Eh...? Ah, yes."

"This."

She took out a book from the *Sōseki's Complete Collection* on her bedsheet and removed the cover. It was the '12th Volume: The Heart'. She opened the cover, and there was no sign of any signature on the inner lining paper. Instead, there was a Hydrangea-styled stamp on it.

"This is a stamp of ownership, a mark the book's owner puts on his or her collection of books. It used to be more popular in China and Japan, and there were all sorts of different stamps, varying according to the user's preferences. They work the same as ordinary stamps; the word-styled stamps were more common, but there were also those with patterns like this. The person who used this stamp might be someone who likes Hydrangeas."

"Wow..."

I did not know about this at all, and I was somewhat impressed by her. However, I immediately had a suspicion.

"Then, that means this book should have a stamp too?"

I asked as I looked at the '8th Volume: And Then' on her knees. If there was such an obvious stamp, it would be easy to notice.

"No, and this is the weird part. In fact, this 'And Then' is the only book that doesn't have any ownership stamp on it, though the other volumes had them."

"...Isn't that strange?"

"It's very strange."

I lowered my head and sighed. Amongst the 34 volumes, there were books with stamps, and no signature, while there was a book with a signature, but no stamp. I got more and more confounded.

"...How did your grandmother make her purchase of the complete collection at my family's bookstore? Did you not ask before?"

"No...I only knew she often bought books before she got married...maybe mom and my aunts were not too clear about this. Nobody was really concerned about these old books anyway."

"...Is that so."

She said as she placed a fist at the end of her lips.

"In that case, the only thing I can think of is that the 8th volume..."

Shinokawa suddenly stopped talking, and I hurriedly looked at the glass window. This time, I did not see anyone's eyes glaring. This certainly was not because of my stare.

"What about the 8th volume?"

I anxiously prompted her to continue, and she seemed to be very hesitant. After a while, she suddenly put her index finger on her lips.

"...Can we keep this conversation amongst us?"

"Huh?"

"It seems we'll be infringing on your grandmother's privacy."

"...I understand."

I hesitated slightly, and nodded. If my grandmother were alive, it would be a different case altogether, but we just passed her one year death anniversary. As her grandson, I probably will be forgiven if I listen in on her private matters. I really wanted to hear and know more about this."

"Actually, the answers already came when you brought this book to me, Mr Goura."

"What do you mean?"

"Without this signature or the price card, nobody would know this book was bought from an old book shop. **Your grandmother probably wanted your family to think this way, Mr Goura**."

"Eh?"

I widened my eyes. I had no idea what she meant at all.

"Whether the case, grandmother did buy this book from the *Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia*, and she did make this signature after that, I suppose?"

"That was what I thought up till just now, but there seems to be something more complicated than this."

She flipped open the '8th Volume: And Then', and touched the signature on the inner cover paper.

"This signature is styled as though it was a dedicatory signature to someone else. Normally, in such situations..."

She spoke till this point, and realized that I had doubts about this.

"The dedication here will be a note written to someone else as a token of appreciation or esteem. When writing a dedication, the names written here will be the author's own name and the person the book is dedicated to."

Dedicatory signature. I see. I learned something new again, and nodded to prompt her to continue.

"The style of dedicatory signature is not fixed. Normally, the other party's signature is written in the middle, while the sender is written on the same side...and this sender would be the author. But this book has it completely reversed."

This is the same as writing an address. It was true that the 'Sōseki Natsume' name was written in the middle, while the 'To Mr Yoshio Tanaka' was written on the left side.

"Maybe it's simply because grandmother wasn't clear about this?"

"Maybe...but there's something weirder. Mr Goura, why would your grandmother write the sender's name as a dedicatory signature? If she wanted to disguise this book as an autographed famous book, she would simply need to write Sōseki's name. There's no need for another name on it."

I had been wondering about who this Yoshio Tanaka was since the first moment I saw this book--who was that person?

"...I think it's the other way around."

Shinokawa's tone was flat, but her black eyes were showing a glint of excitement. I was again attracted by her words, and brought my chair closer to the bed.

"...Other way around?"

If it was someone writing it down continuously, the balance in the words of the signature is a little weird. Was it that the name written on the 8th volume was not Sōseki Natsume, but Yoshio Tanaka's? And that your grandmother added Sōseki's name afterwards...it is natural if you think about it this way."

"Eh, but...this guy called Tanaka isn't an author, but why did he put a signature on it?"

"I don't think he intended to impersonate the author."

She blushed as she answered.

"Is this not a gift? It's not rare to see a sender write his own name."

"Ah..."

In other words, this Yoshio Tanaka gave this book to grandmother.

I suddenly recalled the words my grandmother said when she was alive--that those who like books would like those of the same type. **Grandfather was not someone who liked reading**, and it would be expected that grandmother would have good relations with men of a 'similar type'.

I recovered from deep thoughts. If that were the case, it would not make sense.

"But grandmother bought this complete collection at Biblia, and not from Tanaka."

"This is the case. It's likely that Mr Tanaka only gave her this volume. Perhaps your grandmother came to our house to buy the set of 34 volumes after receiving the signature '8th Volume: And Then'. It was probably a duplicate of the 8th volume that we got rid of. This book didn't have a stamp, and there's no indication of a signature on the price card; this explanation will explain everything."

"But why do such a troublesome thing?"

"So that this 8th volume won't be seen by the family members...if this full set disguise was seen, nobody would think it was a present. It would be too obvious if there was only the 'Sōseki Complete Colleciton' on the bookshelf. That's why she bought the full set of 34 volumes from us...she deliberately left the bookmark in the 8th volume as 'proof' that she bought it at the Antiquarian Bookshop."

"Then what about the signature?"

"The addition of Sōseki's , I think, was added as a failsafe. It was not to let the family think this is the real deal, but possibly to make everyone think that it was 'some useless doodle the original owner' wrote down'."

I thought about it when I first saw this signature. I did suspect that it may be a fake, but I never thought of it being anything other than a random doodle. I was really fooled by grandmother's disguise.

"...Was there a need to go to this extent?"

I murmured. What was it that this grandmother of mine, who did not seem scared of anything, had to hide to this extent?

"It was something in the past...and I feel there is a reason."

She said cautiously. I did realize there was a 'reason' too. My great-grandparents were still in good health before my grandmother got married. Unlike our current age, there were a lot more situations where people would have secretive dates with those of the opposite gender...in the end, grandmother married grandfather through an arranged marriage. This was something Yoshio Tanaka could never do.

I recalled the words my grandmother said to me in this hospital, when she suddenly talked about my marriage partner after expressing her remorse over hitting me. Was it because of the 'And Then' that caused her to remember her marriage? In that case, there was meaning

in the words 'once I die, I'll leave all my books to you two to handle as you please'. She probably felt it did not matter if we saw that signature.

To grandmother, those were all probably related.

"But why must she put it on the bookshelf? She could have hid them somewhere else."

This was the only thing I could not understand. If she had tucked it deep in her drawer or something, there would be no need for such little tricks.

"Maybe she felt that it was safer to put it together with the other books instead of hiding it alone somewhere. And..."

Shinokawa stroked the cover of the '8th Volume: And Then', treasuring it. For some reason, I recalled the hand of my grandmother that beat me up.

"...She wanted to put her most treasured book somewhere she could reach for directly. Maybe it's that kind of feeling."

She lowered her head, looked beyond the book on the knees, and stared far away. In that case, that person was also someone who 'loved books'. Lovers would naturally want to find those of the same kind. I got serious the moment I inadvertently thought about asking.

"...I don't really know how much of what we said up till this point is true."

She suddenly lifted her head and said,

"It was something that happened a long time before we're born, and we can't confirm it with your grandmother...these are the only things that we can gather from what we learnt from this book."

The sides of her lips lips showed a smile, and I felt as if I just awoke from a dream. It is true that we do not know what parts are true, and what are not, given that grandmother has died.

Shinokawa suddenly looked down at her watch. She seemed to be checking the time, and maybe, she had some examination after this.

"What do you want to do with this complete collection? I can buy it if you want..."

"No, I want to bring it break. Thank you very much."

I stood up. Even if it was not something very valuable, this complete collection was filled with grandmother's past. I did not want to hand it over to anyone else so nonchalantly.

"...What you said was interesting, very interesting."

I met Shinokawa in the eyes as she rested on the bed. It would be too awkward to go back like this. While I was wondering how to say that I wanted to hear her continuation of this explanation, she handed over the paper bag with the Sōseki's Complete Collection inside.

"...Thank you."

While I received the bag, her lips moved.

"...Mr Daisuke Goura."

"Yes?"

I was a little troubled to be called by my full name.

"By any chance, did your grandmother give you this name?"

"Eh? ...That's right, but how did you know?"

Only my relatives knew about this, and nobody would want to know how my name came about.

After answering her, her expression became gloomy.

"...When did your grandmother get married?"

Now what is the matter? Is the story still not complete? Troubled, I started to search through my memory. I was not really clear, but I think someone mentioned it recently. Anyway, I suddenly looked into the paper bag.

"Ah, that's right. I heard that this book came out the year before her marriage."

I opened the bag and pointed at the '8th Volume: And Then' at the top.

At that moment, her expression froze. Perhaps it was my imagination.

"I'm really sorry for making you hear so many weird things."

She lowered her head honestly on the bed.

I returned home to report my findings, and my mother's expression changed.

Of course, I did not mention anything about grandmother's past. I simply told her that the signature was forged, but she was angry about

something else.

"When did I say that you're to take it to the bookstore? And you ran to the hospital just to get it validated. Do you know how much trouble that is!? That's even worse than doing a dine-and dash!!"

As expected of the daugher of a diner family, she even said that it was a dine-and-dash. It was a sore point for me since I am the grandchild of the diner family. I decided to obey my mother's instructions obediently and bring a meal the next day. This was the case, and it was a fact that I caused Shinokawa trouble, but I had an excuse to see her again.

The next day was a weekday.

Like the day before, I woke up at noon. Mom had already went out for work. I went downstairs to look at the mail, and found that the hiring company sent a notice. I opened it, and found my my resume and a ruthless rejection saying that I was not hired. Dejected, I sighed, dumped it into the trash bin, pulled the shutter of the eatery, and went out.

It was still a hot sunny day that burned my forehead. The damp hot winds blew from the sea, and the smell of the sea was vaguely mixed it. This was the summer of Kamakura I was familiar with ever since young, and was not comfortable at all.

I filled my stomach at the McDonalds in front of the station, and walked several rounds looking for some 'delicious food' at the station building. However, I had a tough time deciding. I did not know her favorites, and I could not focus on shopping. I was still wondering about the conversation before I left.

Did grandmother give me my name? When did she marry? These two questions did not seem to be too signification, but she was definitely shaken by my answer.

The previous day, I asked my mother regarding my name 'Daisuke'.

"That person forcefully named this when you were born."

She went on a tirade as she said this. It seemed she was still furious over what happened 20 years ago, but it certainly was a little weird to call grandmother as 'that person' so casually.

"She said it was a name she thought of a long time ago. I vehemently disagreed...'Daisuke' sounds like the name of someone from the bōsōzoku[7]."

I was not some former bōsōzoku member, and I really could not agree with her regarding that. How would I know what sort of names were common amongst the bōsōzoku?

"It seemed it was the name of a novel she loved most. The kanji changed, but the pronunciation is the same. I did not remember what novel it was though."

I however knew which novel it was. When I reached home yesterday, I flipped open the '8th Volume: And Then', and discovered that the male protagonist was called Daisuke [8]. My name was definitely taken from here, and Shinokawa must have noticed it.

I did feel my body freeze up when I opened the book, and sweat rolled down me profusely, but I still hung on and read a part of the prologue. The content I read of merely introduced some idle chit-chat with a dormitory student working part-time. It was during this time I found out that Daisuke did not have a job, and I suddenly had a sense of familiarity with him. He was not an extremely motivated person, and I wondered what happened to this Daisuke in the end? Without this 'nature' of mine, I could have read on until the end.

But I was puzzled as to why grandmother gave me this name. She could not possibly be hoping that I become a person with nothing to do.

I thought as I went down the shopping street, and finally stopped at a Western-styled sweets shop. This shop's specialty was the sandwich biscuits with raisins and butter cream. It might be good to bring these biscuits as a snack, and I would be struck with heatstroke if I were to continue on like this.

Just when I was about to step into the shop, I spotted a familiar petite woman. Her skin was slightly tan, and she was a little plump. She had large eyes, and I would think of a little bear cub when I saw her face. She was older than my mother, and seemed to have finish her purchase of pastries as she was holding a plastic bag with a pastry box in it.

"Oh my, isn't this Daisuke? You're here to buy sweets from this shop too?"

It was aunt Maiko who was staying at Fujisawa.

Aunt Maiko is the eldest daughter of the Goura family, and she can be said to be the most successful amongst my relatives.

Ever since young, her grades were outstanding, and once she graduated from a certain Mission school in Yokohama[9], she immediately married a man from an electric works company, and gave birth to 2 girls without issues. They built a large house at Kugenuma in Fujisawa City, located near Ōfuna, and the four of them lived comfortable lives. She was someone who was passionate about taking care of others, but she would tense up when speaking.

She did not resemble grandmother and mom in appearance, and was a chip off the old block from grandfather's photo on the altar.

"My Mina resigned last year, spent some time travelling and going around shopping and touring around with friends. She just found a job a few days ago, near the Kawasaki Center. Such a young girl working at Kawasaki; we kept telling her to resign, but she just wouldn't listen."

I was brought a certain national chain cafe in the station building, and I was the only male customer in the shop full of elderly women. It really felt weird.

"...Kawasaki doesn't seem so dangerous."

We were talking about my cousin, a year after my grandmother's death.

"But Kawasaki had always been a place men always had fun at. There was a lot of overtime work, and I'm worried."

She seemed to have concluded that Kawasaki was a street for merrymakers. That might be the case in the past, but now, there are ordinary shopping districts around the station. Just when I wanted to say this, my aunt changed the topic.

"Speaking of which, how's Eri doing? Is she still busy with her work?"

Eri is my mom's name. She had been working overtime often recently, and had been really busy.

"...More or less."

"Then what about you? Have you found a job?"

"...Not yet."

"What kind of job do you want? Have you taken part in employment drives?"

Unknowingly, it became a lecture to me. I started to understand vaguely once I grew into an adult. Whenever this aunt start talking about her family affairs, it would be a sign that she wanted to hear out who she was talking to. I stumbled as I answered, saying that I went to interview at several companies, and was headed to the Hello Work Agency[10].

"In this economic downtime, it will be hard for you to choose a job suitable for you. You do have an advantage in physical strength. How about you try out for the JSDF[11] or the police?"

She was polite in her words, but she had the same intent as my mom. I inadvertently wondered whether it was because they were sisters that they thought the same thing.

"My husband's worried about you too. If you can't get a job no matter what, come talk with us."

I was a little touch. My uncle-in-law is the second son of the Kugenuma magnate family, and had vast connections in Fujisawa. He retired last year, but I heard he was chosen as a candidate for the City Council. Maybe he could recommend me a job.

"Ah, yes."

"If you continue to idle like this, your grandma will worry about you in the other world. She does treat you like the apple in her eye."

I nearly spat out the ice coffee I was drinking.

"No. That can't possibly be true."

Those narrow eyes were too thin to allow anything in. She was not someone who could easily forgive and love a kid after the kid made a mistake.

"You're just like Eri here, huh? Both of you certainly never realized it."

Aunt sighed worriedly.

"I've seen her longer than anyone else, so I understand this. Your grandma loves you and Eri most...whenever she made to occasional trip to our house, she kept talking about you two all the time. She went for her final trip with you two, right? My husband and I were the ones who proposed to go out with her first, but she refused."

This was the first time I heard this. It was true that my retired uncle and housewife aunt Maiko had much more free time as compared to my mom who had been busy with work, and me, who had been busy looking for a job.

Now that she said so, I never remembered seeing my grandmother quarrel with aunt Maiko before. I thought that they were able to get along unlike my mom, but it could be said that their relationship was not as close.

"Then, why are we..."

In terms of appearance, there was no way my mother and I were pleasing to the eyes. I never thought of anything that would make grandmother happy."

"...Is it because you're tall?"

"Huh?"

I could not help but ask, but aunt's expression was serious.

"I'm not joking here. Your grandfather was the same too; our family members' build are typically short except for you and Eri. I feel she prefers taller people...you see, your grandmother's room had such a thing, right?"

Aunt drew a rectangle with her finger, and after thinking about it for a while, I understood what she was referring to. It was the rubber board on the door frame.

"That was nailed on when we were young. No one in our household grew that tall, and yet she said something like 'it'll be bad if the next child grows up and ends up hitting into it'...that's what she said before Eri was born. It had been 45, 46 years."

I was momentarily stunned. All sorts of numbers in my mind, and I inadvertently recalled what my grandmother said-- 'if you make the same mistake again, you're no longer a child from our house'.

Is that so? I muttered deep in my heart, and gulped down my ice coffee to hide my anxiousness. My mouth felt dry inside, but my hands were soaked.

"...You hit into it, Daisuke? That thing?"

I nodded silently.

"So it does have its purpose after all. Your grandmother must have been really happy."

My aunt's voice felt distance, and I finally understood why Shinokawa was so shocked--no, I still had not confirmed if it was true. I lifted my head.

"Speaking of which, about what I heard before."

I tried my best to remain calm. It was a question I just thought of, rather than it being there for a while.

"What kind of person was grandfather?"

The hand reaching for the glass mug stopped, and my aunt went silent. I could suddenly hear the voices of the surrounding customers very clearly. There were two women of similar age as my aunt seated at the table next to us, chatting away loudly. They seemed to be discussing if the most effective health food was black vinegar.

"Did your grandmother ever mentioned about your grandfather?"

Now that she asked this, I realized I never heard her talk about grandfather.

"...No."

"Then you never heard of how he died."

"I did hear my mom mention it a little...she said that he died in a car accident while coming back from the Kawasaki Daishi in midsummer."

Suddenly, aunt Maiko snorted and gave a bitter smile. This cold expression on her face really shocked me, as it was not an expression she would normally do.

"Eri was really young back then, and she really believe that."

She murmured to herself.

"Why, with so many temples in Kamakura, did he choose to go pray at Kawasaki? And in the middle of summer too?...That Kawasaki Daishi was just an excuse your grandfather made."

"...Excuse?"

"Horse racing and car racing. Aren't these the things that come to your mind when we talk about Kawasaki? Your father's an alcoholic too, and he was dead drunk on the day he got into that accident."

I was shocked speechless. I never thought that my grandfather was that kind of person.

"Your grandfather was a son-in-law adopted into the family, and I heard that he worked really hard when the marriage started. But after I was born, once your great grandparents died, he started to act weird. He would go to the 'Kawasaki Daishi' for several days and never come back."

I finally understood why aunt hated Kawasaki. There was no way she could feel at ease about going to a place her father often went for gambling. She probably did not want to approach that place too.

"It was really amazing that your grandmother did not ask for a divorce...and she kept enduring no matter what happened. Of course, it was a different case when he touched the bookshelf; she was really scary that time."

I held back the words I wanted to say. I still could not remain calm.

"Daisuke, you mustn't act like your grandfather. You have to work hard."

She reverted back to her lecturing tone, and probably told me something even my mom did not know of to warn me. That line was like a message. She moved her chair, and was about to stand up; it seemed she was about to head home.

"...Aunty, have you read Sōseki's 'And Then'?"

Aunt looked at me with surprise as she carried the plastic bag with the Western sweets shop logo on it, and kept blinking her eyes.

"Why ask this out of a sudden?"

"It seems to be a book grandmother really treasured. I started reading it recently."

I said this while gauging grandmother's response secretly. She was showing a doubtful expression, and it seemed she did not know there was a secret hidden in that book. If the eldest daughter Maiko did not know, it seemed that I was the only one in the family who knew.

"I never read the book, but I saw the movie, the one with Yūsaku Matsuda casted as the lead."

This was the first time I heard it was made into a movie.

"What was the end? I only knew that the male lead didn't have a job."

"Hm, it seems..."

Aunt lowered her head to recall. It seemed she did not remember too well.

"I think the male lead got another man's wife."

The sun was setting by the time I reached the hospital.

Like the previous day, Shinokawa was reading on the bed. She seemed to be trying to whistle as she protruded her lips slightly. The moment she saw me however, her face was flushed red, and she brought her head backwards.

"He...hello..."

She greeted me softly, and her attitude was completely different from when she was explaining about *Sōseki's Complete Collection* yesterday. It seemed that she would revert back to her introverted nature if she was not talking about books.

"Hello. Do you have time now?"

"Ah, yes...please come int..."

She fidgeted and let me sit down. When I went into the room, I found a book lying on her knees. She was reading a novel, and the I wondered what book it was, she shyly showed me the cover. It was 'Julia and the Bazooka' by Anna Kavan. It is really a strange name; I could not imagine what the content was about[12].

I again apologized for what happened the previous day, and handed her the sandwich biscuits. She shook her head hurriedly.

"No...you-don't have to mind...I'm the one at fault for saying so much useless stuff..."

The term 'useless stuff' seemed to have some hidden power in it. She refused to take it, and I brought the box to Shinokawa's hands in a half-forceful manner. She then lowered her head awkwardly.

While I was wondering if I was a little too forceful, she spoke softly,

"...I...I just thought of having snacks."

She said with a soft voice.

"If-if possible...can we eat it together?"

Of course, I did not refuse. She opened the box and handed me a biscuit with a separate packaging. We opened our bags at the same time.

It was nicer than I thought. The fragrance of butter and the sourness of raisins were a perfect match, and the crispness of the biscuit was a nice feeling on the teeth.

"I do occasionally buy this to eat...but I can't taste the flavor if I leave it to the next day."

Shinokawa smiled as she said. I was not too sure, but it seemed I made the right choice.

I finished the biscuit in two mouthfuls, and she kept on nibbling. She invited me to eat, but she was not talking at all. Of course, we never talked about the 'Sōseki Complete Collection'.

She knew the secret my grandmother kept for several decades from what I said and from the clues on the book. She also tried her best not to let me discover this secret, and that was why she called it 'useless stuff'.

Of course, it was already too late.

The ‘8th Volume: And Then’ mentioned before was published on July 27 in the 31st year of the Showa Era. That would be 1956—54 years later. My grandmother was married the following year, and I thought that Yoshio Tanaka was the one who gave her the book.

But upon thinking about it carefully, Yoshio Tanaka might have sent the book before it was published, and it might be plausible to say that he gave my grandmother his most treasured book.

My grandmother bought the other books 45, 46 years ago, around 10 years after their marriage. ‘’If Yoshio Tanaka gave that book to grandmother at that time, their interactions happened after her marriage.’’ Sōseki's ‘After That’ was ostensibly a story about how Daisuke stole another man’s wife. My grandparents’ marriage was not happy at all.

My grandmother gave me the name ‘Daisuke’ based on the male protagonist, and it was something she thought of a long time ago—in other words, she did not name this simply because of me, but because there was a possibility my mom would be a boy when she was about to be born. Grandmother bought the ‘Sōseki’s Complete Collection’ from around the time my mom was born.

Aunt Maiko said that grandmother liked tall people, which was why she preferred mom and me. But this was probably half the truth. We

were the only tall ones in the family, and the rest were short. I did not look like grandfather at all.

Did grandmother see the face of her secret lover through mom and me?

She nailed a rubber board on the Japanese-styled room on the second floor. This was something short people would not think about—that someone must have knocked his head into it.

Perhaps she did not nail it simply because of the children after they grew up. If she did not want someone to hurt his head, that would be a certain someone my family did not know of, someone as tall as me.

My real grandfather was the man called Yoshio Tanaka—perhaps this was the secret my grandmother hid at all costs. 'You're no longer a child from our house', did she mean it as what she really said?

But these were only guesses I could make. Since grandmother died, I could not confirm it, but there was a possibility.

"…Is Yoshio Tanaka still alive?"

Upon hearing my question, Shinokawa, who was about to take her last bite, stopped.

"Maybe he's still alive…and maybe…"

She lowered her head. I knew what she was saying. Yoshio Tanaka could meet my grandmother when she was busy with the eatery; that meant that he could be staying nearby.

The patient room was in silence under the sunset. This fact we could not say out was something only the two of us were clear about. We did not know anything about each other, but for some reason, we were related by this common secret.

"Well…Mr Goura?"

Shinokawa's voice suddenly rang in my ears clearly.

"What kind of job are you doing now?"

I was suddenly pulled back into reality. Since she asked me so directly, I had to answer honestly.

"…I haven't found one."

"Part-time jobs?"

"…I'm not doing any at the moment."

I did not know when I would be called in for interviews, so it was hard for me to do part-time work for long hours. I felt more awkward when I said this—but for some reason, her face showed delight. What was going on? Was she happy that I did not have work?

"I…got a fracture, and there's still some time before I get discharged…the shop's already lacking in staff, and it ended up like this."

"…Oh."

She added on vaguely, and I really did not know what she meant at all.

"Then, if you don't mind, can you please come to my shop to work?"

I widened my eyes at her, and she lowered her head deeply.

"Please. My little sister will help, but she's not very reliable."

"Wa…wait a second. I don't understand books at all."

And I should have mentioned about my 'nature'. It was unheard of for someone bad at reading books to work at a bookstore.

"…Do you have a license?"

"Yeah."

"Great. There are no problems then."

She nodded hard.

She nodded her head hard.

"…Is it more important to have someone who knows how to drive instead of being able to read?"

"What a person working at an old bookstore needs to know is not about the content of the books, but the market prices. It's naturally good if you read through many books, and you can learn even if you never read them before. In fact, there are quite a few old book store workers who don't read other than their work period. Maybe someone like me who reads everything is weird…"

I opened my mouth wide. My impression of an old book store had completely collapsed, and I felt that I heard something I should not have.

"Anyway, there's a need to move a large number of books, so a license is necessary. I've been doing the acquisition and valuations of the books, so if you can follow my instructions, Mr Goura…"

Unknowingly, things ended up like this. I immediately recovered.

“Bu-but…isn’t there anyone more suitable?”

“Did you not say that you’re happy when you hear anything regarding books?”

“Eh? Ah, yes.”

“I do become very talkative when I start mention about books…the children working part-time before this all resigned because they could not stand me. I really couldn’t find anyone who could work with me.”

So she wanted to hire me and let me listen to her talk? As I gave her a stupefied expression, she lifted her eyes, ostensibly pleading for assistance. My head felt hot as I looked at her teary eyes. That expression was a crime.

“Anyway, our family bookshop requires lots of physical work, and there are a lot of things to memorize. Our little shop here also gives quite a bit of salary too…”

I inadvertently felt there was no way I could just leave her alone like this, but I did not answer. She leaned over while being surrounded by a hill of books, and nearly fell off the bed.

“…You don’t want to do such a job?”

I suddenly recalled the words my grandmother said to me in this hospital.

(If you can read books now, your life will be changed greatly.)

This person here is a bookworm who has always been reading. I was not really unsatisfied with the me at that point, but I felt deep within my heart that I wanted to live in this pile of books.

And also—I was thinking about Yoshio Tanaka. Most likely, he was a ‘bookworm’ just like grandmother and Shinokawa. If he stayed nearby, perhaps he might appear at the *Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia*.

“I understand.”

Mentally prepared, I stood up and nodded.

“But I have a condition.”

She immediately tensed up.

“…What is it?”

“Can you tell me about the story of Sōseki Natsume’s ‘And then’? What kind of story is it? I want to know as much as I can.

The books passed down through different hands do not simply have contents, but also their own stories.

I learned about the story of how my grandmother treasured this ‘8th volume: And then’. I was also very interested in the story of the book—however, I couldn’t read it until the end.

“Of course.”

She nodded firmly and answered with a smile. Her smiling face made me unable to look away. She seemed to be reminiscing something as she looked up into the sky. After a while, her nice and delicate lips let out a gentle voice.

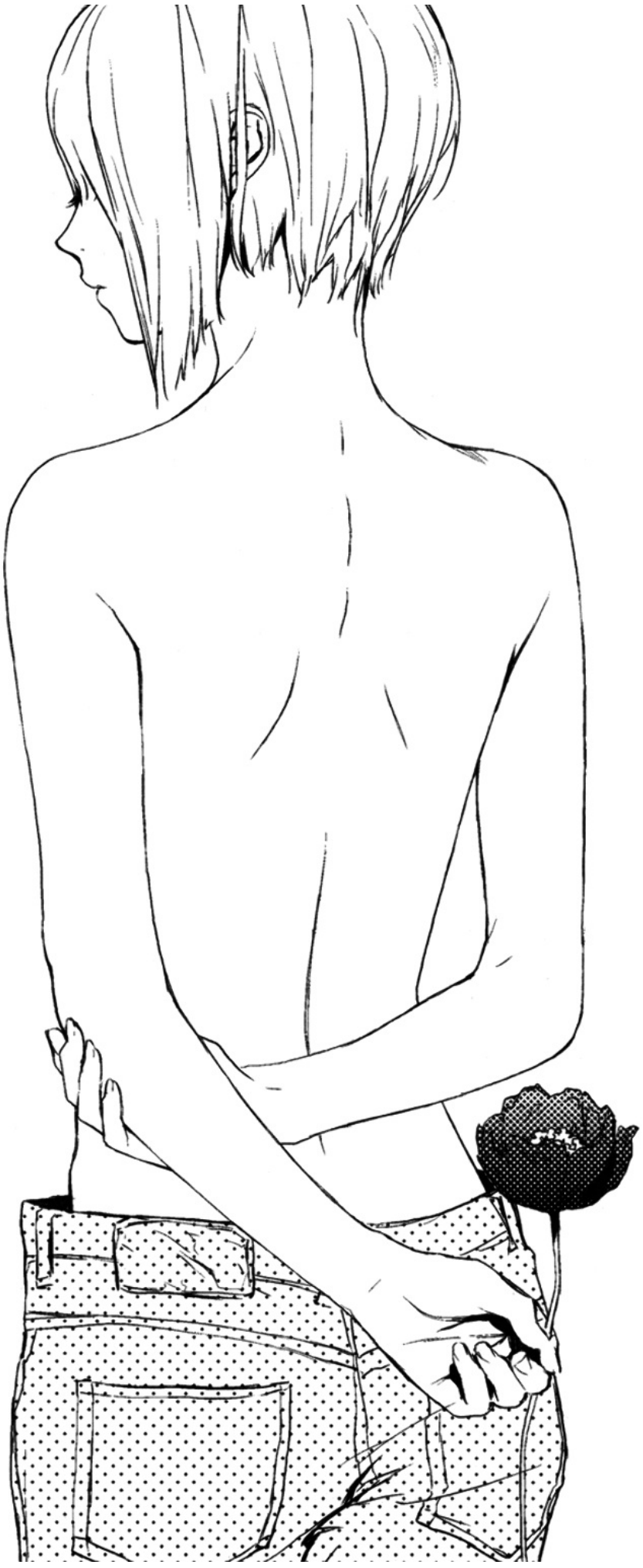
“The story of ‘And then’ was a novel published on the Morning news in the 42nd year of the Meiji Era. This was part of a trilogy that also includes ‘Sanshirō’ and ‘The Gate’…”

Is she going to start from the background? It seemed we were headed for a long conversation. I listened to each word silently as I gently pulled the round chair towards the bed.

</noinclude>

Chapter 2 - Kiyoshi Koyama "Monument Gleaning + Saint Andersen" (Shincho Paperback)

第二話　小山清『落穂拾ひ・聖アンデルセン』（新潮文庫）



Before I knew it, the hour hand of the clock pointed at 11am. It was time to open the shop.

I, who had been leisurely dusting away the top of the bookshelves, hurriedly moved the wagon filled with books, worth 100 yen on average, to the front of the shop, and flipped the rotatable signboard around.

But though I hastily opened the door, there wasn't a single customer waiting. I couldn't see a person on the narrow street near the station platform. The weather was overbearingly hot, and it wasn't appropriate for going out. Large cumulonimbus clouds were gathered in the sky above the roof of the platform, so I guessed there would be a thunderstorm in the afternoon.

The breeze blowing by was humid and blistering, as fusty as anyone's breath. The signboard 'Biblia' spun around, and the words 'Antiquarian Bookshop' came into view.

Anyway, a new day began.

I stretched my back forcefully, and turned back into the shop that was ostensibly a cave made out of books. The dim interior was slightly humid, but it was much cooler than outside.

This was the 3rd day I, Daisuke Goura, was working at the *Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia*. I hadn't known this before, but the shop seemed rather famous in the area as it dealt with some expensive books. After a web search through the Net, I found that this shop actually leased the books for some exhibitions.

I, who had this 'nature' of being unable to read books, had an encounter with the shop owner Shioriko Shinokawa a few days ago, when I brought my grandmother's Sōseki's Complete Collection to her. Because of that, I started working here.

Shinokawa felt that old stories had their own tales in addition to the contents of the books, and had perfectly decoded my grandmother's 'story' hidden in the Sōseki's Complete Collection. That 'story' was related to the secrets of my birth. Shinokawa had an exceptional amount of knowledge in regards to old books, and could display astoundingly uncanny insight. However, she was extremely introverted, and wouldn't dare look at others in the eyes when the topic was not about books.

3 days passed by just like that.

The one who had been watching the shop before me, Shinokawa's little sister—Ayaka Shinokawa—never told me anything except how to use the cash register and where to put the cleaning equipment. It also seemed she was not too certain about what a job in an old bookshop entailed, and had been simply watching my actions skeptically. It certainly was unbelievable that I, who had once appeared in the shop as a customer, suddenly became an apprentice attendant of this shop overnight.

"Besides books, my sister is very ignorant of everything else other than books, you know?"

She repeated the same line so many times it felt somewhat annoying.

"A thief came into this shop a few days ago, you know? Nothing was stolen, but this area does feel a little unsafe now."

The way she rattled on seemed to imply that I was that thief. I remember you're the one who made me go find Shinokawa in the hospital —I really wanted to say this, but managed to hold it within me, and I continued to work silently. I was someone who grew up in a diner, and I could do some basic customer service if I put my mind to it.

Ayaka had been inside the main house this morning, and had not come out yet. Perhaps she had eased up a little of her guard on me, or maybe she thought that it was too annoying to keep watch on me all the time.

The shop was eerily quiet, and I started the computer situated beside the counter. I checked the mail, and found a long email Shinokawa sent. "Good morning, this is Shinokawa." This was the opening, and after that, there was a long list of work instructions. Finally, she ended off with a "I'll leave everything to you. If there's anything you want to know, please send me an email."

All the instructions since my first day of work came in through email. Shinokawa was in the Ōfuna General Hospital, and use of cellphones was prohibited in the patient ward. She could call from the lobby, but she probably wasn't in a state where she could leave the bed.

Of course, I could head over to the hospital properly if it had anything to do with books. However, the issue was that there were no customers. I had no opportunity to talk with her at all.

My morning 'work' included preparing deliveries based on the customers' invoice requests. The *Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia* was one of the shops listed under the antique books catalogue, and many of the books inside this shop could be ordered through the Net. It seemed like the income of the shop was mostly derived from this aspect; I suppose this was why the shop could still run despite the lack of customers coming here.

I moved through the shop that was stacked with books on its avenues, looking for the listed books on the invoices.

At this point, I finally knew what genres this shop dealt with. It mainly dealt with specialty books like literature, history, philosophy, and arts. There were a few Mangas and Pocket books, but these were old books that I had never heard of.

I took the listed books, and returned to the counter. I carefully checked through the email Shinokawa sent to me as I packed them.

It was probably evident without me saying this, but she only wrote about work in her emails. For some reason, I felt that there were unwritten words implied when she stated, 'If there is anything else.' It seemed to say, 'please do not contact me if there is nothing going on, and do not go to the hospital.'

I didn't think she would be happy to hear unnecessary and random talk from me; the image of her whispering, "…Is that so," and reverting back to silence appeared clearly in my mind. Of course, it would be vastly different if it had anything to do with books. She would definitely explain to me with her eyes dazzling, just like before, and this was what I was looking forward to.

The door creaked open; I lifted my head and found an old lady with white hair walking into the shop. A parasol dangled from her armpit, she was dressed in a neat plain one-piece dress, and looked extremely refined.

It was an unfamiliar face that I met for the first time, but I supposed she was someone who lived nearby. She seemed to have come back just after completing her groceries, since she was holding onto a shopping bag with a supermarket label on it. She smiled and nodded at me, and I nodded back at her. The customers in the morning are all old people like her.

The old woman went around the shop once, stopping at several corners, flipping through the books, and browsing through them excitedly. Finally, she again nodded at me and opened the glass door, probably unable to find a book she wanted to buy.

At this moment, another customer was also entering, so she stepped aside.

I stopped what I was doing, as the new customer was dressed very oddly. His head was bald, and his eyes were large and wide. He was a short man, and I could tell from the wrinkles on his tanned face that he was in his late 50s. He was dressed in a T-shirt way too large for him, with a Union Jack flag on it, and jeans that were tattered along the edges. His neck had a pink towel draped around it.

I didn't know what his occupation was, but he definitely wasn't a salaryman on his day off. He was also holding a large bag that was made from leisure sheets.

The woman seemed to be as shocked as I was. She tried to squeeze by the bald man, ostensibly trying to escape—and she seemed to bump into him with her shoulder. At this moment, the bald man suddenly grabbed her shoulder.

"…Hey you, hold on for a moment."

The baritone voice was filled with a menacing intent, and the old lady immediately turned as pale as paper. I hurriedly got up from my seat; this wasn't some bustling street at night, but rather an antique bookshop during the day. I never unexpected to see such a dispute here.

"What are you doing!?"

I was about to pull the bald man aside, but he suddenly gritted his teeth and bellowed,

"You idiot, why're you grabbing me here!? Look!"

He reached into the old lady's shopping bag, and pulled out the item at the top. At that moment, I could not help but exclaim. He was holding a large book that was encased; it was the book written by Jirō Konwa and Kenkichi Yoshida, 'Modernology', the one I just placed on the counter. The name was a little unique, so I still had an impression of it. I returned to the counter, and found that there was a missing book—in other words, she was a thief.

"Ah…"

She groaned in surprise. I was more surprised than shocked to learn that she approached the bookshelves by pretending to support herself off the shelves because she wanted to steal books. I thought thieves would be Middle or High School students, but never expected that an old lady would do such a thing.

"…I hope you can forgive me here."

She suddenly gave me an begging look, a vast difference from the rich lady-like attitude she showed before. Perhaps this was her true nature.

"It's not like I'm doing this because I like it. At this age here, there are times where I have to do this, so please spare me some sympathy here, please?"

She suddenly gave me a pitiful look, and it really was awkward. In such situations, I should formally hand her over to the police, according to the stipulations of the service industry, but I was a little hesitant on doing this. Perhaps it was because of my grandmother's upbringing that I was not used to dealing with old women.

"Such indecent things you're saying for your age!"

The bald man bellowed.

"This world has no room for shameless old folks like you. You might as well sell some chickens instead of stealing books!"

He was much more furious than I as the employee was, and he grabbed the old lady again. I had to stop him, and while we remained in a faceoff on the narrow passage, the old lady lowered her head slightly.

"Sorry to trouble you."

She suddenly turned around, ran out, and quickly disappeared from my sights. I also hurried after her, but lost sight of her. She escaped really quickly in a way unbefitting her age.

"She's most likely a serial culprit."

The bald man said to me as I returned to the shop.

"Be wary of thieves or something, will you? Won't it be pointless for you to watch the shop if this keeps up?"

"…I'm sorry."

I lowered my head. I was grateful that he managed to stop a thief, but I was a little confused as to why he was lecturing me. Who was he?

Once he noticed my shocked and doubtful stare, the man suddenly pointed at his chest and said,

“My name’s Shida; I’m a frequent customer of this shop.”

The man who called himself Shida approached the counter, and stacked some Pocket books there. There were 7, 8 of them in total.

“…What are these?’

“Can’t you see? I’m selling these books.”

My heart throbbed for a little. Like this, I could go look for Shinokawa with a proper reason, and delightedly returned to the counter.

“The person in charge of appraising isn’t here, so please leave them and come back tomorrow…”

“I know.

Shida said impatiently.

“She’s hurt and hospitalized now. Are you a new employee? You must really like this job. Don’t you find the shopkeeper weird? It’s rare to see such an introverted antiquarian bookshop owner like her.”

As he had said, he proved he was a regular customer of the shop. He casually reached his hand towards the counter, and drew a piece of paper from the file holder. It was the invoice slip for customers to record transactions; he knew where the items were placed better than I was.

He wrote in an ardent manner. I inadvertently noticed his right hand, and his fingers were heavily cracked. The black ink stain reached into the narrow and long fingers, and that was the hand of someone living a tough life.

“Right, this should do it.”

He said as he handed me the receipt. The address given was ‘Under the Bridge of the Kugenuma Beach in Fujisawa City’, and that troubled me. I thought I was rather familiar with the Kugenuma Beach area, but I never heard of the place ‘under the bridge’.

“Where’s that?”

I asked, and at the same time, I noticed nothing was written in the telephone number column.

“Hikijigawa river flows this way, and there’s a bridge right in front of the Kugenuma Beach. You know that place? It’s slightly up from coastal road.”

Shiba drew an imaginary map with his index finger as he said.

“Yes.”

“It’s right below the bridge.”

I stared at his face without looking away—and after a while, I understood what he meant. This man was homeless.

“I picked these books recently. I’m a book watchman.”

“Book watchman?”

What does that mean? Shida however did not answer my question and tapped at the books in his hands a few times with a smiling face.

“Anyway, bring these to the hospital and get the shopkeeper to appraise them. They might not look this way, but they are decent old books. Your shopkeeper will definitely love them.”

“Ah, well.”

I wanted to ask Shida what he meant by being a Book Watchman, but Shida leaned his body over the counter, ostensibly afraid of letting others eavesdrop. I was the only person present in the shop. He really exaggerated his actions.

“…Well, there’s something I want to ask this shop about. Can you please notify the shopkeeper for me?”

“Huh?”

I didn’t know what he meant at all, but he did not give me any room to interject.

“I’m a regular customer here, so there’s no problem, I guess? …Anyway, it happened yesterday…”

As I remained speechless, Shida started to articulate further.

That evening, I went to the hospital. Shinokawa’s sister had no club activities in the afternoon, so she took over in keeping watch over the shop. I knocked on the hospital door, and there was a soft voice inside. It was vague and muffled, but it seemed like she was inside the room.

We had not met in 3 days, but I wasn’t particularly delighted. I had been thinking about the customer Shida who had appeared during the day—the ‘request’ he presented to us.

“This is Goura. Please excuse me.”

I said as I opened the door.

“I just sent the email. The book appraisal…”

I was suddenly speechless. Shinokawa was on the bed, drying her hair with a towel. It seemed she just finished her shower, and her white skin was dyed a little cherry pink. Once she realized my presence, she stopped what she was doing and remained still.

“Sorry. I’ll wait in the corridor.”

Flustered, I headed outside.

“It-it’s fine…please come in…”

Shinokawa called me with a teeny-weeny voice, and lowered her head as she let me sit on a chair. Her beautiful and glossy black hair was drenched, drooping above her eyes, and I inadvertently gulped.

“I-I just…showered…I thought you would come by later…erm, sorry…”

It seemed like she wanted to say she just showered, thought I would be late, and was sorry for tidying herself at this moment.

“No, you don’t have to apologize to me about that.”

The shop was being attended to, so I came by earlier. I coughed for a while; if there was silence, I’d inadvertently think too much about the scene right now.

“You showered in the hospital’s bathroom?”

She nodded. The fragrance of the shampoo still lingered in the air.

“Helped me…”

Shinokawa murmured as she put aside the towel. She probably wanted to say that the nurse helped her bath. I see.

She suddenly took a deep breath, as if she wanted to relax. Her pajamas rose greatly with her chest, and my vision instantly settled there. I thought she was just a petite person, but I may have been mistaken—ah, am I an idiot? What would happen if she found out? Better get down to proper business.

“Can you look at these books?”

I handed over the bag I brought along. To be honest, I was a little skeptical. The Pocket books Shida brought did not seem to be as good as he advertised, and they did not look old at all.

However, once Shinokawa took out the books, her attitude changed.

“Wow, this is amazing.”

Shinokawa squealed in delight like a child receiving a Christmas present. She enveloped the Pocket books tightly, and the spines pressed into her breasts, leaving me at a loss for where I should look.

“Look!”

Her eyes dazzled, and she turned the spines towards me. They were of Chikuma Publishing and Kōdansha Arts Publishing, the three volumes of *Our Mutual Friend* by Charles Dickens, the first and second halves of *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing* by Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, the *Limited Edition, Gentle Love Story of Nishōtei* by Ryūzaburō Shikiba, the first and second halves of Shigemaru Sugiyama’s *Hundred Demons*… It seemed each book was cryptic in content, and I didn’t know what was so good about them.

“…Are they really that valuable?”

“Yes. Each book can sell for 2000, 3000 Yen.”

“Eh? Really?”

I was shocked. That was more expensive than what I thought. Those books did not look that old.

“All these books are highly rated by critics, and there haven’t been any reprints. It’s possible to purchase hardcover books, but they can’t be bought with just two, three thousand Yen. There’s a huge demand for such limited edition books in the old books market.”

I remembered Shida’s spirited look. He may look suspicious, but his ability to pick books was not to be underestimated. I was a little concerned as to how he got the books. He said that he ‘picked them recently’ after all.

“A customer called Shida brought them here.”

“Ah, so it’s him after all! I was wondering if it was him.”

She said excitedly.

“That’s because this is his specialized genre.”

“Specialized genre? What does that person do?”

“That man’s a book watchman. Did he not say so?”

“He did… but what’s a book watchman?”

I hadn’t gotten the chance to ask the man himself, as he never gave me the opportunity to raise the question.

“They’re people who buy cheap books from antique book stores and sell them at high prices. Mr. Shida goes around the new antique bookshops in the area every day.”

This was the first time I had heard of such a business. I didn’t expect people could earn a living through such a mission.

“Then why did he call himself a ‘Book watchman’?”

“There are many given explanations, and one of them is that they check the bookshelves and spot for any potentially valuable titles. [13]. Mr. Shida has always specialized in rare books trading…maybe he knows more than I do.”

“…”

Anyways, Shida was a rare customer who could contribute rare book titles to our shop. I couldn’t help but regret it a little; if only I had listened to him seriously.

“Did Mr. Shida make any requests?”

She looked at me through her spectacle frames.

“H-how did you know?”

“He always does this whenever he sells some good books to us. He wants to purchase some limited edition books of a certain publishing unit…am I right?”

She gave a sweet smile as she said this. I guess that would be because he often came to them with requests; since he wanted to sell the old books he has to this antiquarian book shop, it would be more beneficial to have connections.

“Hm, how do I put it…it’s about a limited edition book.”

I didn’t know where to begin. It was a request that was a little—no, very intriguing. Anyway, I first took a note from my pocket, something I had jotted down to prevent myself from forgetting.

“He wants us to get the First Edition of Kiyoshi Koyama’s Monument Gleaning + Saint Andersen…

“It’s an anthology from Shinchō Paperback. It seems like the First Edition was released in the 30th year of the Showa Era.”

Shinokawa immediately replied with the details.

“In that case, our shop should have some entries. It’s really not uncommon…”

“No. He doesn’t want a book in our stock.”

I shook my head.

“His request was, ‘My book’s stolen, and I hope you can help me get it back’.”

“Eh?”

She blinked her eyes. I arranged Shida’s long description in my mind; it would be better, I thought, to convey what he said in the correct order.

“…I don’t have any money, and I’m not young anymore. Right now, I’m still satisfied with my life; I don’t have to be a burden for others, and can still live on my own. Not all old people complain about unreasonable things like that woman who just stole.

There are some books I won’t sell no matter what. Everyone can have a book they treasure, right? For me, that would be Kiyoshi Koyama’s anthology Monument Gleaning + Saint Andersen. You’ve never…read it before? Such an unstudious person.

That, was basically my talisman; I always put it in my bag and brought it along so that I could read it whenever I wanted to…but that book was stolen. It happened yesterday.

Isn’t there a path to Kobukuroya on that side (he pointed in the north-west direction)? It’s the place overlapping with the coastal road. You know the first traffic light when you head down the coastal path?...Right. There’s a cross junction. The left leads to Ōfuna station, and there’s a temple at the front. [14]I rode a bicycle there yesterday afternoon.

Why, you ask? For work, work. Recently, I knew someone working in the same line of business, and we agreed to exchange our books there. The second half of ‘The Coming of the Book’ that I just brought was obtained from him.

…Huh? You’re asking me if I only have the second volume? Are you serious? The latter volumes of such rare book series are harder to get. There are those who only buy the first volume and not the second volume, not the other way around, right? There are fewer copies of the second volume in the market, and that makes them more valuable.

We agreed to meet outside the temple. I arrived there first and parked my bicycle at the pine tree beside the shrine gates…there wasn't anyone around, and it was very quiet. I didn't bring my watch, and I guessed it should have been almost 2pm.

That temple in Kamakura isn't considered to be a large one, and there weren't many visitors, especially since the sun was scorching hot yesterday. I fared much better under the shade of the trees; those waiting for the bus at the station were sweltering there.

I was bored and had nothing to do, so I thought of reading a book under the tree. My bag was in my bicycle basket, and naturally, I brought that Kiyoshi Koyama book.

Just when I was about to take it out, I suddenly felt my stomach ache. It probably isn't proper of me to say this, but I'd been having diarrhea for the past few days. I wanted to watch my food intake, but it was really hot, and my house didn't have a fridge.

But there was no sign of any convenience stores or restrooms nearby, so I went to the temple. I thought there would be a restroom for tourists to use.

I then placed the bag and the bicycle under the tree, thinking that nobody would steal it. I was really careless, and now that I think about it, it was a grave mistake.

I passed through the gates and went down the sandō[15]. After a while, I heard a crash from behind. I looked back and found a young girl lying beside a bicycle, and my first instinct was that she crashed into my bicycle, as my bicycle was parked somewhere along the pedestrian pathway.

"Are you alright?" I asked the girl… well, that girl was about 16, 17 years old, had short hair, and was rather tall. If it were not for the fact that she was wearing a skirt, I would have assumed she was a boy.

Our stuff were scattered in front of the temple, and my bag naturally had the book I just mentioned.

"Sorry. Please help me lift this bicycle."

I said that loudly. Well… I guess I reached my limit there, and I had no strength to pick everything up and put them back into the bicycle.

That girl however did not look back, ignored my bag, and instead picked up her dropped paper bag to check the contents carefully… I did not know what was inside, but the plain maroon bag looked pretty high-class.

That kid then started to look around. It seemed like something very important dropped out of her bag, and she suddenly picked up something before running off.

To be honest, I felt it was strange back then. That kid picked up what looked like a Pocket book. Anyway, when I came back from the restroom, that friend of mine had already arrived and helped me pick up my stuff. I thanked him and checked the contents of the bag, only to find that Kiyoshi Koyama book missing… it took me a while to realize it was missing.

I asked my friend, and he said that he just passed a tall girl. That girl crossed the road and seemed to be headed for the bus stop. Of course, there was no one there when I reached there, as the bus had already gone by.

I bid my friend farewell, and checked the bus stop just in case, but she was not there after all. I guess she took the book and got on the bus.

Anyway, I couldn't get that important book back. So there's something I want to ask this shop…

Huh? You're asking me the reason why the girl stole the book? Isn't that obvious? That kind of old book is definitely worth a lot of money; she must have intended to sell it for money.

That's why, when I thought about it, I realized this old book shop was the closest one from that temple. If that kid brought that Kiyoshi Koyama book, can you help me buy it quietly? I'll pay for it.

…The police? No, I don't want to call the police. I don't want to catch the culprit. I just want to get the book back. There are times when people do the wrong things in a stupor… but I really want to give her a piece of my mind.

Anyway, please help me notify your shop owner… I'll come back again tonight. I'm going off then!"

"…That's how it was. What do you think?"

I made this crude summary, and looked over at Shinokawa. Her hands were folded on her knees, and she gave a pondering look.

"I guess Mr. Shida really likes Kiyoshi Koyama's works. I noticed this first when he prevented that book theft."

She said calmly, and I was about to nod and agree.

"Eh? That has nothing to do with Mr. Shida's request, right?"

I merely mentioned that he prevented a theft offhandedly when I was explaining Shida's request, but she smiled and shook her head.

"In the anthology Mr. Shida had, there would certainly be Koyama's signature work Monument Gleaning. Do you know what it is about?"

"No…"

"It's a short story about an insipid description of a poor novelist's daily life. Of course, the basis of this story was the author himself. He met a young girl in an old bookshop, received a birthday present from the girl, opened the wrapping, and…ahh, sorry, I went on a tangent again."

I had already leaned forward unconsciously. I was actually more interested about the meeting with the girl at such a place, and what happened after the wrapping was opened. But she deliberately coughed and changed the topic.

“Back to the main topic, the opening of Monument Gleaning has a line like this.”

She looked up and recited fluently.

“‘If possible, I hope to age earlier, to a point when my back arches and prevents me from doing anything. At that moment, I may try raising a few chickens to make a living, but not all old people spend their time grumbling about the misfortunes of the world’.”

I was a little surprised. This truly was just like what Shida said to the old lady. I did feel a little surprised when he suddenly mentioned selling chickens.

But right now, I was surprised about something else.

“…Did you memorize all the novels you’ve read so far?”

Upon hearing this, she waved her hands in a flustered manner.

“H-how can that be? That’s not it. Memorizing everything is really… I merely just remembered some pages with the good parts of the books…”

“Eh? Isn’t that amazing? I’ve never met anyone like that before.”

I expressed my true thoughts verbally, but her response was beyond my expectations. Stupefied, her mouth was wide open, and her face turned bright red.

“…I-it feels weird to be praised.”

“Eh? Is that so?”

“This is the first time someone’s said that I’m amazing…”

She peered at me from behind her spectacles, and just when her eyes were about to meet my stare, she suddenly lowered her head again. I felt a little lost as to what I should do.

“…An-anyway, I suppose we should help Mr. Shida here.”

A peculiar atmosphere surrounded us for a moment, and Shinokawa again coughed purportedly to change the topic.

“Mr. Goura, please take note if anyone comes back to sell Monument Gleaning + Saint Andersen. Also…”

The eyes behind the glasses frowned.

“…I do wonder about something.”

“Wonder?”

“Did that girl really steal the book for money?”

I had been wondering about this question too. It would have been a different case if she were a book watchman like Shida, but would an ordinary person think of exchanging an old book that was randomly picked up for money?

“I feel like it’s a little strange to only steal a single book.”

She said.

“Mr. Shida agreed to exchange books with another book watchman. That meant that there were other items that could be exchanged for money. If she wanted money, don’t you find it weird that she left the other items behind…?”

I nodded. It certainly was intriguing—Shinokawa, who had been folding her arms, suddenly brought her body and leaned out at me. I thought that it felt like a pose of a model in a magazine, but I hurriedly dispelled that notion.

“Wh-what is it?”

“I feel that Mr Shida won’t get his lost book back if this keeps up…why don’t we look for that girl?”

“Eh…”

I never thought of that. Was there a need to go to such an extent for that book watchman? However, I resisted the urge to say something and stop her. Shinokawa’s large eyes widened. Even without the involvement of book trading at this point, this incident could be the best excuse for me to be here.

At the same time, my enthusiasm to search for the culprit kindled within me.

“Let’s help out then. I’ve been thinking about saying this too, actually.”

I said with conviction, or at least something to the extent of that hyperbole. She happily clapped her hands in front of her chest.

“Thank you very much. I knew you’d say that, Mr. Goura.”

Upon hearing her say that about me, I couldn’t help but feel a little touched. So she really trusts me? Just when my mood changed for the better, she continued,

“But if the girl’s not going to sell it for money, why did she steal the book? What do you think, Mr. Goura?”

I was a little lost due to this sudden question. I actually intended to hear her out all the way, just like how it went when she unraveled the mystery behind the Sōseki's Complete Collection the last time.

“Ah, yeah… maybe she stole it because she wanted to read a book? Or maybe she wanted to read, but couldn’t find a book.”

“I think the chances of that are rather slim.”

Shinokawa firmly denied this with a twinkle in her eyes. The way she answered with such an expression showed more conviction than any words she said.

“This book isn’t really considered rare, and it’s not hard to find them in old book shops. There was a reprint of the book 15 years ago.”

“Then… ah, yes, maybe she took the wrong book during the mix up…”

I heard from Shida that the girl’s bag dropped. There was no way to be sure she didn’t have a similar book, and took the wrong one in the confusion.

“I thought of that too, but in that situation, the girl’s book would have remained at the scene… I think there must have been a reason that caused her to steal the book.”

“Hmm…”

I could not think of any more explanations. This would be the limit of my mental abilities—no, wait, wasn’t this weird?

“If she’s not selling it for money or to read, why did she steal the book?”

“Yes, I do feel this is the crux of the incident too.”

Shinokawa said spiritedly.

“The real reason why the book was stolen will become the clue leading to the girl. Let’s investigate this through.”

“Eh… but how do we go about doing that?”

From what Mr. Shida described to us, I understand a few things.”

She raised her delicate index finger as she said this, and I inadvertently looked at it.

“First, she was very anxious back then. She knocked into the bicycle parked at the side of pedestrian pathway because she was running too fast.”

“…Yeah.”

I nodded to prompt her, and she then raised her middle finger.

“Also, another thing is that the bus arrives infrequently. According to what Mr. Shida said, there were people waiting at the bus stop… I can guess that she was in a hurry trying to get to there.”

I started to gradually understand. She was very anxious because there were others waiting for the bus.

“But this is confusing. She was anxious, but why didn’t she run to the station after getting up… he said she checked through the contents of the bag and looked around.”

“Ah, yes. She was looking around for the item she dropped…”

“But she didn’t pick up the item she dropped… she picked up Mr. Shida’s book. I think there’s another possibility.”

She slowly pronounced each word separately.

“The item in the bag did not drop out, probably because it broke or something?”

“Broke? What kind of item is that?”

“I don’t know…in that case, it might be possible she took the book to replace the broken item or to use it to repair something. She looked around anxiously, picked up a pocket book…”

I continued to stare at her intently. It was the same as when she solved the Sōseki's Complete Collection. She could deduce so much given so few clues, and she didn’t step out from the ward room at all.

However, there was something I didn’t understand very well.

“…Anyway, what are pocket books used for?”

Shinokawa sighed, and she bent her raised fingers. She might not have realized it herself, but she looked as adorable as a Lucky Cat[16], to a point it made me feel awkward.

“I can’t think this through no matter how I try. There’s too little information.”

She said sternly while maintaining the pose of the Lucky Cat.

"…It might be better to ask the book watchman who agreed to meet with Mr. Shida. Maybe he might know something."

"Eh? Why?"

"Mr. Shida's associate said that he brushed by the girl, but he wouldn't know where she went if he only brushed by. He knew she went to the bus stop because he looked back, right?"

"…I see."

My enthusiasm was pricked again.

Shida would come to the shop later. Would I have to ask him how to contact that man?

"But that man might not come here."

"Yes, that's true. I think we should be the ones to visit him."

"I see… wait, who's going to ask?"

She looked at me doubtfully. That was a really stupid question between us. Shinokawa couldn't leave this hospital. Wasn't it already decided that I'd be the one to go?

The next day was a regular rest day for the *Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia*.

It was the first rest day since I started working, but I was outdoors, baking under the sunlight. I parked my scooter in front of the Kamakura temple, the 'scene' where Shida lost his book.

I stood under the shade of the pine tree, wiping my sweat as I looked around. This place was close to my High School, and I often came here when I participated in the school's temple sightseeing activity—a staple activity for schools in Kamakura. The houses were positioned not too differently from how they were back then. It was near the coastal road, but I couldn't find any convenience stores or family restaurants. This was a quiet residential area that seemed quite sleepy, and I couldn't find any pedestrians no matter where I looked.

I agreed to meet Shida's associate at this place.

Shida again came to the *Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia* the previous night, and was extremely delighted to hear that we'd look for the thief girl (and the prices his books would sell for). He told me he had something he wanted to ask the associate, and contacted the associate using the phone in the shop. I didn't talk to the associate directly, but he agreed to meet me cheerfully, and told me the time and location to meet.

"You should read the 'Monument Gleaning' once."

Shida said to me after he contacted his associate.

"I first read that book when I was starting this business. I did not intend to do this business like what I'm doing now; my company and family was in a mess… but I guess it's nothing much. I do find it blissful to read under a bridge."

Shida first appeared at the *Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia* several years ago, and Shinokawa did not know where and what he did for a living before that.

"He was just a poor man who's not good at building relationships and bad at social affairs. My wish to live a completely content life was simply a wish. It's all the more impossible to find an innocent and benevolent girl who could treat such a man gently, I guess."

Shida's tone was much gentler compared to what he said. He was ostensibly talking to a brother helping him.

"But though the author knew this very well, he still wrote this story. You'll understand if you read it… I really found myself empathizing with the author who wrote this overly blissful story."

I nodded—and really had the urge to read it.

"…Actually, I know it's difficult to get that book back, but I'm unwilling to give up so easily… I won't blame you even if you can't find it, so please relax with regards to that… send my regards to that 'baron'."

"…What does he mean by baron?"

I muttered under the pine tree. Would that be the nickname of the book watchman? Shida never told me how he looked like, but I guess I would know the moment I meet him.

I checked the clock on my cellphone. It was slightly past the agreed time to meet, and just when I thought about how we had already talked about where to meet,

"May I know what you are doing here?"

An inquiring voice came from behind. I looked back, and found a tall man in white shirt walking over from the temple gates. He was

probably in his late 20's, and had curly hair and long eyes. His un-tanned skin gave off a fragrance of cologne, and if not for the leather business bag he was carrying, I would have believed he was a model taking photos in his free time. Did he come back from a grave visit?

"I'm waiting for someone."

I answered, and the man's eyes immediately dazzled. He then revealed his teeth and smiled at me passionately.

"In other words, you're the same as well. I walked around the temple because I came by a little early… are you the one helping Mr. Shida find his book?"

"Yes."

The man held my hands tightly and shook it a few times. I was still a little lost regarding the situation, and I alternated looking at his hands and his face.

"I'm Mr. Shida's friend Kasai. For some reason, he gave me the nickname 'baron'."

Kasai shrugged his shoulders. Anyway, he was just like a pretty boy in a painting, and I really wanted to call him something regal.

Kasai presented me with a business card. Naturally, I didn't have one. "I'm Goura, working at the *Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia*." I had no choice but to introduce myself verbally.

"Ah, so you're from that old book shop? I did pass by the shop before, but never went in. Are you the owner?"

"No, I'm just a shop attendant. I just started working there."

"Is that so? Please allow me to visit it when I have time in the future."

He said with clarity.

"I only knew you were Mr. Shida's friend, so I thought you'd be in the same line of business. I'm really sorry to call you out on a working day."

Kasai scratched his head slightly. He looked a little scrawny, but he did not seem to be a bad person.

I looked down at the business card in my hands, at the words, 'Owner of Kasai Bookstore' above the name Kikuya Kasai. I heard that he was a book watchman before, but it seemed he also operated a shop.

"'Kasai bookstore' is the name of the shop I use online. Normally, I specialize in purchases and sell them online, so my methods are a little different from Mr Shida."

I could not help but marvel at how there were such book watchmen. It was true that it would be faster to sell the books to the customers directly rather than through other shops; this method of operation was probably no different from an ordinary old book shop.

"I'm not too knowledge about books, and I mainly manage some limited edition song albums and games. I've exchanged goods with Mr. Shida, and the genres we manage don't clash with each other."

Looking at the attire alone, he did not seem to be someone lacking in funds. He seemed to be a rather capable book watchman.

"Oh yes. Is it regarding the kid who took Mr. Shida's book?"

I recovered upon hearing Kasai mention it. I then explained to him what Shinokawa discovered; that the current information we had was not enough for us to look for that girl who stole the Kiyoshi Koyama book—after hearing my story, Kasai raised his eyebrows.

"What? I described it fully to Mr. Shida. He never said such an important book was stolen."

"Do you know something?"

"What I know is not just what you know; I didn't just brush by her, actually. Right there."

Kasai said this as he went to the coastal road. The bus stop was right where we were headed, and I could see the traffic lights and cross junction a little further. He stopped in front of the old gates in front of the temple rafters.

"It might be more appropriate to say that we met each other coincidentally rather than brushed by. It was around 2pm, and I was walking over from the road junction. She was squatting in front of this gate doing something, and there's some rustling sound."

The gates were slightly concave into the garden, and I could not see the scenery within. I looked back at the pine tree; from the positioning, it seemed the girl arrived there and waited for a while after stealing the book.

"What was she doing?"

"She turned her back away from me, so I'm not too sure. There was a maroon bag placed on the ground, and she reached her hand inside. She seemed really anxious, looking at the station from time to time. I thought it was weird, but since there was a appointment I was about to head off. When I was about to leave, she called me."

I was a little surprised.

"Eh? You talked to the girl?"

“Yes. She asked me, ‘Do you have a pair of scissors?’.”

“Scissors?”

“Yes, scissors to cut paper. I thought she wanted something else, and to be honest, I never heard of pedestrians asking others to lend them scissors…but I just so happened to have a pair with me. I have to deliver a lot of goods by mail often, and it’s much more convenient to tie the packages.”

Kasai drew out a pair of stainless steel scissors from somewhere, and looked satisfied as he opened and closed it.

I stared at the blades that were glittering slightly. If it was just like what Shinokawa said, to use the book to repair some broken parts, would that mean Shida’s book was cut into pieces?

“I didn’t know Mr. Shida’s book was stolen when I lent her the scissors, and she looked really embarrassed. She used it only for a short while, and returned it to me.”

“Did you see what she did?”

“Her bag was turned away from me, and I couldn’t see what was inside the bag… no, wait. She was holding something when I lent her the scissors. I guess that was…”

Kasai looked up at the sky for a while, and soon continued slowly,

“…I think it was a coolant.”

“Coolant?”

“That kind of thing used to keep food cold, you know?”

I knew that, but I did not understand why that girl would be holding a coolant.

“Does that mean the bag contained food or something?”

“Maybe, but I couldn’t tell what it was.”

Pocket book, scissors, coolant; I had no idea what could be linked between them.

“After returning the scissors to me, she immediately crossed the road and ran over to the bus stop.”

Kasai pointed at the bus stop on the opposite side of the road. There was a female high school student in uniform, waiting for the bus there; it was the uniform of my alma mater. She probably came back after finishing club activities, and there was a bow bag taller than her, standing on the ground.

“There was such a high school student waiting for the bus yesterday, but it was a blond boy with a guitar strapped behind his back… the bus had not arrived, and it was meaningless to watch on, so I headed off to the temple.”

“So the girl got onto the bus, right?”

“She should have been able to, but she never did.”

“Eh? What’s going on?”

She should be able to ride the bus from here to Ōfuna station. I always thought that girl was headed to the station.

“I reached the gates, and started to pack up Mr. Shida’s belongings. After a while, I was a little concerned about that kid, so I looked back at the station. The bus just so happened to be leaving, and the other passengers had already got on, but she was the only one left there.”

“She already got all the way to the station. She didn’t get onto the bus?”

“That’s how it was. I didn’t know the reason, though. After that, she carried the bag in her arms towards the street junction, and that’s all I saw.”

I tilted my head. After hearing Kasai’s description, the mystery seemed to be bigger. She carried a bag with coolant, stole the pocket book, used the scissors to cut something, ran to the station, did not board the bus, and watched it leave—I had no idea what was going on at all.

After bidding farewell with Kasai, my phone immediately ran. It was an unknown number, and I hesitated a little before pressing the receive button. “Yes?” I merely said, and waited for a reply, but the other side of the telephone remained silent.

“Hello, may I ask who is calling?”

There was still no reply. Was it a prank call?

“What in the world, seriously.”

I said impatiently. But just when I was about to hang up the phone:

“…This is Shinokawa.”

The soft voice that came shocked me.

“Shinokawa? Erm, why did you call all of a sudden…”

My mind was in complete chaos. I did tell her my number before, but I never thought she would really call me. She wasn’t allowed to use the phone in the ward room she was staying in, but it was possible to send me emails through the data communication terminal.

“I-I’m, in the corridor now… I just came out from the rehab room…”

Now that she mentioned it, I remembered there was a space in the corridor for patients to make calls. She must have called from there; it would have been better if she had told me that right from the beginning.

“I have an urge to know what Mr. Book Watchman said… so I gave you a call. I’m really sorry… so…”

She was about to hang up, and to my surprise, I inadvertently raised my voice when I spoke into the phone.

“Wai-wai-wait, please wait!”

If she hung up like this, this misunderstanding would probably continue.

“There’s something I want to ask you. I just finished my conversation with that book watchman!”

I started relaying what I heard from Kasai without further ado. Luckily, she did not hang up—but I got the feeling she was getting more confused the more I described things to her. It was improbable to think that anyone could understand such fragmented information conveyed over the phone.

I got all the way to the point where the girl crossed the road. Shinokawa clearly asked me some questions, ostensibly showing no surprise or doubt.

“…That child left the bus stop with the bag like that?”

I heaved a sigh of relief. Her attitude had changed the moment she asked about books; this was the state when she solves a mystery.

“Eh? Yes, that seems to be the case.”

I answered. I really couldn’t think of anything else important. At this moment, she let out a sigh:

“…I see. I understand now.”

“Understand what?”

“What she wanted to do, and why she stole that book…”

I widened my mouth in shock.

“Eh, really?”

“I don’t really understand, but I have a rough gist of things.”

“Amazing! I couldn’t even think of an idea…”

I was really shocked she was about to deduce the truth through such a message. It seemed I was wrong to think nobody could crack this case; she could show astounding insight whenever it was something related to goods.

“…No, I’m not that amazing…”

She went silent, and I, who was excited about this, felt that something was amiss. She said she solved the case, but she sounded dejected; she did not seem happy at all.

“Then what’s it all about?”

I was affected by her, and my voice softened. After a while, she said.

“…It’s a present.”

“Huh?”

“That girl had a present in the bag, and it seemed to be a food that required cooling. Since the bag did not have any commercial brand, I suppose she did not buy it from somewhere, but made it herself. She was that anxious because she wanted to deliver it in person.”

“To who…”

At that moment, I recalled Kasai’s words. There was another person waiting for the bus, a youth with blond hair, carrying a guitar on his back.

“And the reason why she didn’t get on the bus is…”

“She didn’t intend to get on the bus, rather she wanted to hand that youth a present… but got into trouble in the meantime. She knocked into Mr. Shida’s bicycle and fell over… the bag with the present dropped onto the floor.”

“…Did it break inside?”

I remembered the sandwich cookie I ate with Shinokawa. That was the last dessert I had recently. Was it that type?

"No, if it's broken, it can't be given. What was broken wasn't the dessert… there should be something outside the dessert."

"Outside?"

"It's a present to the opposite gender, so there should be some delicate wrapping. Maybe the decoration or something broke, and she had to repack it again immediately, but she didn't bring any materials and tools. She also couldn't find any convenience stores nearby… at that moment, her eyes spotted Mr. Shida's pocket book…"

"But there's something weird about this."

I, who had been listening quietly, was unable to catch up, and I interrupted.

"I've never heard of using book pages to repair a wrapping."

"…I don't think she used the book either. What I want to say is…"

The sound of a bus door opening chimed, and there was a large bus stopped in front of the station when I realized this. I inadvertently let out a cry.

A young man got off the bus. His school pants were partially covered by a white shirt, and he had a guitar case on his back. He was probably headed to school for practice. My alma mater would always hold culture festivals right after summer vacation; did he form a band with his friends and join the light music club?

The short hair was bright and blond; it seemed he bleached it.

"…What is it?"

"A high school student just got off the bus. Maybe it was the guy waiting at the bus stop when the book was stolen…"

"Go after him!"

Shinokawa blurted on the phone.

"Please ask him regarding that girl."

"Got it. I'll call you later."

I hung up for the time being and trotted over. I saw public bus close its doors and leave. The boy had his back turned away from me as he walked forward. If the school rules hadn't changed, students should have been banned from having such bright dyed hair. He probably dyed it this eye-catching color because it was the summer holidays.

"Sorry, may I disturb you for a moment?"

The boy stopped and looked backwards. He immediately glared at me; his eyes were long and narrow, probably showing a savage expression on purpose.

"…What?"

He said unhappily, and really dragged his 'what' out. This was a common manner of speaking here, and I used to say this when I was in middle school and high school.

"A few days ago, did a girl come to this bus stop…?"

I asked, and suddenly realized something. It was said the girl took the bag away; that meant the boy did not accept the present.

"…A girl wanted to give you a present, right? That's what I want to ask."

The boy looked as if he tasted something bitter as he frowned.

"Ah, you mean Kosuga? What, are you her acquaintance?"

I remembered the name 'Kosuga' firmly in my mind. This boy seemed to know her.

"There's something I want to ask her about. Could you please tell me her address, or how to contact her for that matter?"

"…Are you the police?"

"Ah, no…"

I didn't know how to continue. I failed. In my haste to call him, I couldn't think of what to ask him at all. No one would give the personal information of an acquaintance just because of this—but after thinking about it a little, he heartily took out his phone and showed me the phone book screen. The phone number and email address were listed right below the name, 'Nao Kosuga'.

"She probably lives around here, and I don't really know the details. Is the phone number and email address enough?"

"…Thanks."

I thanked him doubtfully. The boy suddenly curled his lips, and gave a thin smile befitting a painting. He seemed to have practiced it in

front of a mirror.

“Did that brat do something bad? She’s a strange one.”

He said with amusement, not showing any concern for that girl called Nao Kosuga at all. I could tell he was extremely delighted.

“…What do you mean?”

“You’re looking for her for some reason, right? What about here? Are you going to abduct her and throw her in some deep sea?”

I frowned. It seemed like I was considered a delinquent; my appearance often gave this impression.

“You don’t really know her?”

“Not really. We just happen to be in the same class. I do talk to her in the classroom, but I really hate women with bad attitudes.”

“So you rejected the present?”

“Even though it was my birthday, I do have the right to refuse, right? She was shocked when I told her, ‘I don’t want your present’.”

So he pretended to look amicable in school, yet was completely different behind the scenes and could even gain delight from doing this. He could actually tell a stranger someone’s personal information.

There was no reason for me to warn him about anything, but the more I listened, the worse my mood got. I needed to get a way to contact Nao Kosuga, however. I let him use his infrared communication to send the data to my cellphone.

“I’ll be off then. I still have club activities.”

After the boy left, I remained there for a while. Although I got an important piece of information, I could not bring myself to be happy.

While scouting for clues regarding the old book, we found out the girl wanted to give a birthday present, but her present was not accepted. Shinokawa probably wanted to be certain if Nao Kosuga took the bag with her when she left.

I suddenly recalled Kiyoshi Koyama’s Monument Gleaning. After Shida recommended it to me, I bought a copy of Kiyoshi Koyama’s short story anthology. It had been a while since I personally bought a book with printed text. Monument Gleaning was a very short novel, and I barely managed to finish it just when I was feeling uncomfortable.

The protagonist, a novelist, was extremely poor, and lived his life peacefully every day. He was destitute, but he had quite the idle life; he merely bought some things, cooked, and read some books.

On a certain day, he became friends with a young girl from an old bookstore who called herself a ‘protector of the books’. This hardworking and down-to-earth girl gave the protagonist a nail clipper and an ear pick. In the end, the protagonist accepted the presents heartily.

The story was overly blissful, just as what Shida said; it could cause people to forget the bitterness and loneliness in reality. Of course, the book didn’t state if the protagonist really had this experience, and one could think this was a fictitious diary by the author as a protagonist.

A present that could cause someone to feel such warmth in a story would never occur in reality. Even if someone were to give it, there was the possibility of rejection, just as what happened before.

I recovered from my deep thoughts. Anyway, I would first tell Shinokawa what I heard from the boy, and then discuss about what to do next.

I took out my cellphone, and dialed her number.

The sun was setting outside the window, and a narrow crescent moon appeared in the sky, looking just ready to disappear. I sat on the chair beside the bed, and checked the time on my cellphone.

It was 7pm, the appointed time.

“…She’ll be here, right?”

I asked Shinokawa.

“She’ll come… that’s what she replied to me.”

After hearing my words during the day, Shinokawa sent Nao Kosuga a mail, informing her we were looking for the book in place of the owner, and hoped she would make a trip to the hospital. “I’ll go.” she merely made a reply. She had something to say to us—I guess.

“It’s good if she can return the book.”

She borrowed scissors from Kasai, and definitely cut the book in some way. I guess the book would be incomplete.

“…It’s fine. I don’t think the book will be cut to a point where it’s unreadable.”

“Why? Didn’t she cut it with scissors?”

“She did cut…”

Before Shinokawa could finish, we heard someone knock on the door sharply. The door swung aside before we could reply, and a tall girl dressed in jeans and T-shirt walked in. She had well-defined eyes and a refined figure; I thought she resembled a pretty boy rather than a pretty girl.

She walked into the middle of the room, stopped, looked around quickly, and lowered her head at us while ostensibly glaring.

“…I’m Nao Kosuga.”

“He-hel-hello…I-I’m Shinokawa…”

Shinokawa’s eyes fluttered as she reported her name.

“Huh? Be louder, ‘kay? I can’t hear anything when your voice’s so soft.”

The girl chided back with a forceful voice, and Shinokawa’s face immediately turned beet red.

“No… erm… well…”

She was at a loss of what to say. Shinokawa seemed to be confused due to Nao Kosuga’s sudden appearance. Why was the book thief the one acting justified, while the inquirer was fidgeting?

“We are from the *Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia* near Kita-Kamakura station.”

There was no choice; I spoke up for her. Even after stating our shop’s name, the girl showed no reaction at all; it seemed she did not know about the existence of our shop.

“I’m Daisuke Goura, the shop attendant there. This is the shop owner Shinokawa. The owner of the stolen book is a regular customer of ours, so we’re helping him look for it.”

Suddenly, I noticed that Nao Kosuga didn’t bring anything. Where was the stolen book?

“You stole the book, right?”

She folded her arms and raised her chest arrogantly.

“…So what.”

I didn’t know how to continue in response to such a rhetorical question. Was she denying her guilt, or did she intend to admit and apologize? This girl’s attitude was certainly bad, just as what the boy said.

“How did you find out my email address? I didn’t tell anyone before. Did you steal it from someone else?”

She was really infuriating me. Given her position, she had no right to begrudge others for peeping in on her.

“Your classmate told us.”

“Classmate? Who?”

“…A blond guy. I met him at the bus stop near your house.”

Suddenly, her face turned pale.

“…Is it Nishino?’

So that guy was called Nishino… I had already noticed that the boy didn’t give his own name back then. He was rather cautious regarding his own personal information.

“Did you say anything to Nishino regarding that book?”

Nao Kosuga said in a groaning tone.

“No, not at all, but he told me right away.”

“Nishino… he actually…”

Her shoulders shuddered slightly. This girl had been let down twice, first when she gave the present, and second at this moment.

“Can you return the book?”

I asked. Even if I said anything to console her, she wouldn’t feel relieved at all. What happened between Nishino and her was still her problem, and our job was to get Shida’s book back.

“…I can’t return it now.”

Nao Kosuga suddenly turned aside angrily.

“HUH?”

I inadvertently raised my voice.

“What do you mean by being unable to return the book?”

“Shut up! This has nothing to do with you, right!? You definitely don’t know what happened anyway!”

“Wait, why are you angry!? You’re the one who stole the book…”

“…I guess I know what happened.”

Shinokawa suddenly said as she remained on the bed, sitting up straight as she stared at Nao Kosuga . The hesitant attitude she showed before had disappeared; it seemed she had completely switched personalities.

“I had intended to wait for the book owner to arrive before talking about your situation… or do you wish for me to inform him?”

This voice had a force that caused Nao Kosuga—and also me to quiet down instantly. That was just for a fleeting moment, however, before the girl glared at Shinokawa again.

“Don’t talk like you understand. Can you describe to me what happened?”

“…Yes, most probably.”

Shinokawa answered without missing a beat, and the girl’s stare got more heinous.

“Then, explain it to me now. Show me if you really can do it.”

I felt this was not good. If Shinokawa made a single mistake, Nao Kosuga probably would not return the book. Of course, this case could be solved if we called the police, but that wasn’t what Shida the victim hoped for.

“Are you sure?”

I asked beside Shinokawa’s ears, not because I was doubting Shinokawa’s innate insight, but that I was worried if she could convince the other party—however, she nodded without hesitation.

“Sure, it’s fine.”

Then, she closed her eyes as she said, and said eloquently.

“That day, you made a dessert for your classmate, Mr Nishino, as a birthday present…you needed a coolant, and since it wouldn’t break even when it dropped on the floor, I guess it’s a tart or something similar. After wrapping it, you decorated it with a deep red ribbon, packed it inside a paper bag, and left the house. You knew Mr Nishino would head to the nearby bus stop after club activities and take the ride back home…am I wrong in any way up till this point?”

Nao Kosuga opened her mouth wide. It seemed everything fit.

“…You crashed into the bicycle in front of the temple, and the bag dropped onto the floor. Though the content itself did not break, the packaging changed shape. The decoration around at the knot was probably damaged…an artificial flower or something similar. You needed a string to fasten it.”

“Eh? A string?”

I inadvertently interrupted. Shinokawa opened her eyes, and drew a pocket book from the pile of books. It was the book ‘Sanctuary’ by William Faulkner[17], printed by Shinchō Paperback. She flipped through one of the pages, and raised the maroon cord in it.

Ah, I could not help but exclaim—that was how it was.

“All the books from Shinchō Paperback have this book cord…of this yarn-like texture[18]. In the past, most of the printing companies would do so, but only Shinchō Paperback does so nowadays. Monument Gleaning + Saint Andersen does have a similar deep red book cord, and you stole the book for this.”

“…Wh-where did you see it?”

Nao Kosuga muttered.

“I didn’t.”

“Then how did you even know about the color of the ribbon…I should be the only one who knows what’s inside the bag. Even Nishino did not see it.”

“I can guess the color of the ribbon from the fact that you made use of the book cord. The paper bag was maroon in color too, so I wondered if the wrapping inside was of the same color…also, the book cord in a pocket book is definitely not long. There are only a few things it can repair.”

Shinokawa closed the Sanctuary book and put it back into the pile of books beside her table.

“At first, you must have thought of using your hand to tear the book cord, but the cord was not as easy to remove as you thought. You had no choice, and borrowed a pair of scissors from a man passing by, and took down the book cord…the book was useless at that point, but you did not throw it away immediately because that man was still present. You decided to give the present first, and hid the book and brought it along to the bus stop…”

Suddenly, she stammered.

"…In the end, you were unable to give the present. You left the bus stop, forgetting to deal with the book…am I wrong anywhere up till this point?"

Nao Kosuga knelt down in a sudden deflated manner. Nobody spoke up during this short time.

"…You even knew about that?"

She buried her head into her knees and muttered weakly.

"By any chance, do you…know why I did not return the book?"

"I'm not too certain… you did not do anything to the book after you took it back, and you thought of returning the book, but you aren't explaining it. Looking at these few points…"

Unknowingly, Shinokawa's voice became softer and gentler.

"…Are you now reading the book?"

The girl lifted her head, her ears slightly red. Then, she seemed to be regretting her faltering as she looked away from the hospital bed.

"I did not intend to read in the first place. I don't like books…but it just happened to drop open right in front of my eyes…"

"…So the page with the Monument Gleaning story was opened, right?"

Shinokawa continued. So that's how it was, I muttered in my heart. This was Shida's favourite story, and he probably would have marked the page of the short story he liked.

"That story has a part where a girl in her teens gave a present to a man on his birthday."

I managed to digest a little of what was going on. The girl was of a similar age as her, and once she saw the episode about the girl giving a birthday present, she had the enthusiasm to read on.

Nao Kosuga continued to kneel down like that, her hands pressing her chin, her ferocious expression becoming gentler, and her face showed some signs of immaturity.

"I don't know whether I like him or not, I just found him special… That's why I wanted to give a present. I didn't know that guy hated me. Well, I guess I wasted my time and effort here."

Her voice was extremely cheery, and I did not if she was either forcing herself or really feeling relieved.

"That story was really a complete fulfilment of my wish. At first, I wondered how there could be such a girl, but maybe it was written with the knowledge it was a wild wish. I knew that, and it's a good story…I thought I would continue to read the other stories in this book."

She put her hands on her knees covered by the jeans. The age, sex and circumstances were different, but maybe those that like the same type of book have similar senses.

"…I apologize for stealing the book and cutting the cord."

She said,

"If you don't mind the cut cord, I'll definitely bring it back tomorrow. There's still a little bit I want to finish reading…"

"That won't do."

Shinokawa interrupted her words with a quiet tone, and continued to say to the startled girl.

"You have to return the book to the owner, rather than us. The owner of the book is Mr Shida, someone who likes the Monument Gleaning story just like you. If you apologize with such a sincere heart, he'll definitely forgive you."

I finally noticed it, that Shinokawa already had the intention of making the girl apologize directly to the man himself the moment she called her here. This method was more suitable instead of us giving the book back, and I guess Shida would definitely be happy.

"…I understand. I'll do that."

Nao Kosuga nodded without hesitation.

A few days later, in the morning, I brought Nao Kosuga to the coast of Kugenuma station. The coastal road was filled with vehicles filled with tourists from outside the county, and the traffic remained stagnant. The sound of waves breaking could be heard from afar, and the windsurfing sails glided on the rippling waves.

I should have noticed from the moment we proposed Nao Kosuga return the book herself that she did not know where Shida lived. Someone had to send her there, and I was the only one who could do so.

I made a turn at the coastal road, turned into a narrow alley along Hikijigawa River. The number of pedestrians here decreased drastically.

Nao Kosuga brought the book along honestly—no, I did not see it personally, but she was holding a slightly large paper bag. Of course, we did notify Shida beforehand, and he said he would be waiting for us at his lair.

She hardly spoke anything as we went on our way. I could tell she was a little tense.

"…It's around there."

I pointed below the steel bridge. There was a structure made of plastic sheets built near the foot of the concrete base; as if proving my point, a bald middle-aged man opened the sheet aside and walked out.

Nao Kosuga was a little taken aback by Shida's appearance, and widened her eyes slightly, but merely for just a moment.

"…This is enough. I'll go alone."

She quickly went down the diagonal side of the concrete block, and I hurriedly followed her. She said it was enough of me to send her there, but I had a duty to ensure her safety. Upon noticing me, Shida took off the tower on his neck. The girl stopped right in front of Shida and stood there.

"…I'm Kosuga."

"I'm Shida. Good morning."

Shida introduced himself. The girl fidgeted around clumsily, took out the pocket book wrapped in cloth, and handed it to Shida with both hands.

"I'm returning this. I'm sorry for stealing this from you."

Shida received the book silently, and removed the cloth while seemingly wanting to confirm the existence of the book. I could see the book name of Kiyoshi Koyama's Monument Gleaning + Saint Andersen clearly. It was really old, and the pages looked slightly brown. Shida flipped through the pages and touched the remaining part of the book cord lightly.

"…Ah, what a pity."

He sighed. Nao Kosuga seemed to be a little worried and lowered her head.

"I'm really sorry that I can't repair anything…"

"No, I'm not talking about the book."

Shida shook his head.

"Eh?"

"I'm talking about you. You worked so hard for this, but the other party did not did not accept your present."

The girl remained still, ostensibly caught unaware by this. I could see her expression stiffen.

"I only came here to apologize."

She muttered softly, seemingly suppressing her felings.

"I don't need your sympathy…such a thing doesn't matter."

"No, it's not about whether it matters or not. You're hurt because your good intentions were trampled on…there's nothing wrong about that. There's no need to lie about such a thing."

Shida said quietly. He knew how devastated Nao Kosuga was.

"I-I'm not lying…"

"It's fine not to say such flaunting words, there's nobody related to your daily life with you here, right…if possible, how about you try telling me what happened?"

Nao Kosuga gritted her teeth, and her shoulders shuddered.

"It's meaningless to say such things…isn't it a waste of effort?"

"Well, I guess it may be a waste of effort."

Shida nodded.

"But if you just sound off to others, you will feel relieved somewhat…you see, the Monument Gleaning's the same right. There is a line in the story, 'whether it is useful or not, how great it can be if we can become people who can be there for each other'. These words seem a little cheesy, but they can etch deeply into people's hearts. If there's anything bothering you, I'm here to listen."

The girl suddenly closed her eyes hard, and her mouth widened. I thought she wanted to shout, and got ready to move, but an unexpected thing happened.

Tears trickled down. She did not make a single sound; those were silent tears.

During that short moment, none of us spoke up. I could vaguely hear the sound of waves from afar. After a while, Shida said to me.

"You can head back now. It's a conversation between us after that."

‘Huh?”

I widened my eyes. Was it fine to leave these two here—no, I did not think Shida would do anything to this girl, but it would not be good to leave a crying High School girl like this, right?

“I can’t…”

“You’re an outsider right? I’ll pay you back for helping me find this book a few days later.”

Shida said with a surprised look, and asked Nao Kosuga.

“What do you think? Do you wish for this man to be here?”

She shook her head without hesitation, and said with nasal sounds.

“…You can head back then.”

Since the two parties said so, I had no choice. I left the riverside while feeling a little left behind.

A few days passed by peacefully afterwards.

I did not know what Shida said to Kosuga. Once I reported the outcome to Shinokawa, “I see.” she merely answered this and seemed to have lost interest in this case. Well, we were really outsiders, just like what Shida said that time. There was no reason to delve further into this.

However, a week later, I heard something I was concerned with from Kasai, who appeared at the *Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia*. The latter said that he could not find Shida under the bright at Kugenuma Beach.

“His luggage is still there, but his bicycle was not. I feel he has been gone for many days…and I’m a little worried.”

Kasai said unenthusiastically. It would be good if there were any support facilities nearby, but there was a possibility he was involved in some accident or incident.

Perhaps it would be better to ask Shinokawa, or should I send an email to ask Nao Kosuga first? I thought about this as I worked, but just when it was approaching evening, Shida himself appeared in the shop.

“Yo, long time no see. Are you working hard?”

He approached the counter happily. His face was tanned, and his bald head was showing vague signs of greying hair. His clothes were a lot dirtier as compared to the last time I met. He looked like a survivor born somewhere.

“I caused you trouble before because of this book.”

He said as he drew a pocket book with a cover over it from his bag made from leisure sheets, and showed me the contents inside. It was Kiyoshi Koyama’s Monument Gleaning + Saint Andersen.

“After you left, we talked at the riverside for quite a while. We were really into it when talking about Kiyoshi Koyama…she’s a little aloof, but she’s a good kid.”

He said graciously, and seemed to suddenly remember something as he drew a paper pouch from his bag. It was like a gift, and the pouch had a pretty ribbon tied on it.

“She even gave me this, saying it’s to repay for cutting off the book cord…look inside.”

At that moment, I realized the bag still had ample space even with a pocket book inside. I suppose the present was placed inside. The bag had signs of being opened before; doubtfully, I opened the paper bag, and was immediately startled. Packed inside was a small clipper and a metal ear pick.

“It’s like she heard my heart, didn’t she? This might be the most valuable present to me, right?”

Shida smiled as he said. I understood his intention. This was the same as what the young girl in Monument Gleaning gave the protagonist. On a closer look, I found that Shida’s nails were neatly cut. It seemed he immediately used the gift once he received them.

“I managed to get the book back thanks to that big sister. That kid even said…she managed to depict everything correctly even though she was stuck in hospital the entire time.”

He then hesitated a little before continuing,

“…It was scary that she was absolutely correct.”

I was a little unhappy. She was the one who said everything correctly, but I thought I put in quite some effort too.

“Anyway, it’s really abnormal to get the book back so quickly. I have to return a gift to this shop at least…this will be it.”

Shida put the nail clipper and ear pick back in, and handed me a pocket book. It was not Kiyoshi Koyama’s book; it was probably a little newer, but not a recent book. It was Peter Dickinson’s Walking Dead[19], printed by Sanrio SF Paperback. I never heard of this book before, but it should probably be a Sci-Fi novel.

“What’s this?”

“Why’re you still asking me, you idiot!? Of course I came here to sell it!”

Shida exclaimed loudly.

“Name any price. I’ll sell it even if it’s for 1 Yen.”

I lowered my head and looked at the Walking Dead. The book was overly thin, and it looked cheap. The given price was 480 Yen. It did not seem to be a book Shida was proud of, but anyway, I would bring it over to Shinokawa for her to have a look.

“Where’ve you been the past few days?”

“Well you know, it’s definitely something to do with work. I went through many places, and finally found this book…at least say a thank you very much or something.”

Why was it that I had to be the one thanking him? Did he not bring the book as a gift to us?

“…Thank you very much.”

Anyway, I lowered my head. I was really an idiot for worrying about him.

After closing the shop, I made a trip down to the hospital. The sun was setting, and Shinokawa, who had her laptop activated in the ward room, greeted me clumsily.

“Th-thank you…”

After saying that, she went silent again. I had been working at this shop for more than a while, and we hardly talked about anything other than books.

“…Thank you.”

We then went silent. Even though we met often, it would be pointless not to say anything. I decided to talk about something random for the time being.

“Shinokawa, how’s your injury?”

“…Injury?”

“Didn’t you say you went to the rehab room?”

“Ah, yeah…I guess that’s the case…I have been rehabbing.”

She answered with a soft voice.

“How did you injure yourself? Speaking of which, I never asked about that before.”

It seemed she had a corset on her waist, and her legs were not bandaged in casts. I heard she injured her legs before; had she recovered?

“…”

She fidgeted around, wondering what to say, and finally said nothing. I was a little disappointed. I hoped to use this chance to improve my relationship with her, but we just could not even start with a random chat.

“Er-erm…”

Suddenly, Shinokawa raised her voice. She seemed to be taken aback by her own voice as she cringed her neck.

“I-I’m not good at talking about anything other than books…bu-but I can talk to you about a lot more things than usual, Mu Coura…”

I could not help but ponder. If this was considered a little more, would this not be a bad thing?

“Erm…you won’t resign from this shop, right?”

“Eh?”

“I get along with you easily at work, Mr Goura…so…”

I stared at her. I knew what she wanted to say. Of course, my answer would be a definite yes—she was a little eccentric, but I was very happy to hear she needed me.

“I won’t resign. I can also listen on regarding books.”

To me, who had been unable to read even though I want to, this would be the perfect environment no other place could provide. I do have a few grudges with regards to my pay though.

“Ah, yes.”

I suddenly remembered I came here because of the books, and drew out Peter Dickinson’s Walking Dead from the bag Shida brought.

She tentatively lifted her eyes and looked at the pocket book I handed her—and her eyes behind the glasses widened suddenly. Her expression immediately brightened, and it changed as if she switched into a different personality.

“Ah, it’s the Walking Dead!”

The next moment, the book disappeared from my hands, and ended up in Shinokawa’s. She beamed blissfully and looked at this pocket book from all angles. The black-clothed girl on the hard-covered book continued to swivel around.

“Where did Mr Shida find this book…did he say anything about it?”

“No…is it really a rare book?”

"Sanrio SF Paperback had a publishing lineup catered to collectors. They published a lot of Sci-Fi and Fantasy literature from the non Anglo-American circle that were uncommo in Japan, but bad sales caused them to stop printing for 10 years. This company translated and printed a lot of such Sci-Fi novels, and such titles are There are also quite a few Sci-Fi fans who collect these pocket books published by all Paperback companies too.

She was completely energetic, and continued to rattle on with her explaination.

“This Walking Dead is a very rare book that’s in circulation. It’s uncommon in the antiquarian book market, and nobody had imported it.”

I finally knew why she was really excited. Anyway, it was really very valuable; would it be the same as the previous pocket books?

“How much can this book sell?”

“Well…the top, bottom and edges aren’t darkened, and the cover is very pretty…it can probably sell for more than 50,000 Yen…”

I was speechless. For this one book? I never thought it would be this expensive. Shida even said he would sell this valuable book for ‘1 Yen’—this would be an ample ‘thanksgiving’ for an old bookshop. He probably spent quite a lot of effort getting the book.

“Did Mr Shida mention about Miss Kosuga?”

“Well, it seems they had quite the lively chat over Kiyoshi Koyama.”

Shida looked really delighted when he showed off the dazzling nail clipper and ear pick to me. Perhaps it was because he met someone who had similar interests as him.

“Mr Shida accepted that child’s birthday present. It was…”

“A nail clipper and an ear pick, am I right?”

She immediately answered. I, who was about to continue on in a satisfied manner, was inadvertently shocked by this.

“Eh, how did you…”

The reason appeared at that moment, and my question stopped midway through. When Shinokawa was talking to Nao Kosuga here, she told the latter that Shida liked the Monument Gleaning too, and—even told her to apologize with this attitude.

I thought about it at this point; perhaps she was hinting for Nao Kosuga to give a nail clipper and a hook. She probably expected Shida’s delight, and that he would forgive Kosuga.

I stared at the side of Shinokawa’s face that was dazzling innocently, and recalled the words Shida said before he left the shop after leaving the Walking Dead behind.

“I caused you some trouble here, and I really want to thank you, but…”

Shida was at a loss of words, his face showing a serious expression.

“That big sister is amazing, to a point where it worries me. Being too intelligent can be a troubling thing; that big sister hasn’t realized this however, you need to take note of this, you know?”

At that time, I thought he was simply worrying too much. This person only had interest in books, and would not cause trouble.

At this point, though I did not change my thinking—but I was a little concerned about the nail clipper and the ear pick. I knew she did not do this out of malice, but I could not say she was not instigating others according to her will. If she knew about it, she probably would not be happy about it.

Maybe I just had to pay a little more attention; it would be fine as long as I continued to work with her.

Shinokawa, who was flipping through the pages, opened her mouth, and let out a hoarse breath.

It seemed she wanted to whistle, but she herself did not realize this at all.

Chapter 3 - Vinogradov/Kuzmin "Introduction to Logic" (Aoki Paperback)

第三話　ヴィノグラードフ・クジミン『論理学入門』（青木文庫）

There was no response when I knocked on the door, so I opened the door and entered the room.

The setting sun was shining into the room through the window, and for an instant, I was unable to see the bed as it was partially covered behind increasingly tall stacks of old books. The patient--my employer, Shioriko Shinokawa, was nowhere to be seen on the bed.

She was probably doing her rehabilitation, and she wouldn't normally be around during this time. Perhaps she was too anxious when she went out, as her notepad computer was left on the bedside. Though this was a hospital, it was too careless of her. There was a safe at the rack beside the bed, but she seemed to have no intention of opening it.

I bent my waist and walked into the room. Recently, it had become a daily routine for me to watch the shop starting in the morning and bring the books the customers left with me to this place in the evening. She would appraise and value the books, I would bring the books back to the shop, negotiate with the customers, and if a deal was struck, keep them in the shop--my job was simply a repeat of the same motions.

"He...hello..."

A soft voice rang, and I looked around.There was a woman dressed in blue pajamas and a cardigan sweater outside the ajar door on a wheelchair. She had long black hair and thick-framed glasses. It seemed she was at a loss of what to do as she lowered her head and fidgeted unnervingly.

"Ah, hello."

I hurriedly moved aside, and she entered the ward room on the wheelchair. The middle-aged nurse pushing the wheelchair entered as well, and she frowned as she avoided the obstacles and pushed the wheelchair towards the bed. Her movements were not clumsy, but a wheel knocked into a stack of books, and the tower of 'Japan Ideology Series[20]' books stacked from the floor nearly tumbled over.

"Ah!"

The two women called out at the same time; Shinokawa hastily checked the books, while the nurse checked the wheelchair.

"...I did mention it before, but please reduce the number of books here."

The nurse warned sternly as she helped Shinokawa from the wheelchair to the bed. It seemed she was warned before, but I guess this was to be expected.

"...Ye-yes. I'm sorry, I'll take note next time..."

Shinokawa lowered her head earnestly on the bed--but it was doubtful if she would really take note. This beauty is an incorrigibly hopeless 'bookworm', and reading is as important as breathing to her. If the reminder before this couldn't change her, would it not be futile now?

"You too, please take note of this!"

Suddenly the nurse directed her complaint towards me. I was leisurely listening to their conversation, and upon hearing the nurse's words, I unwittingly straightened my back.

"...Me?"

"Right! Please do not bring any books when you visit next time. Even if she is your girlfriend, you cannot pamper her too much!"

"Eh..."

I was speechless. The nurse folded the wheelchair, placed it as close to the bedside as possible, gave us a glance, and walked out. An awkward atmosphere lingered.

"...It's troubling."

The ambiguous line broke this silence.

Of course, we weren't lovers--but the relationship between us was not simply that of a shop owner and employee. She wanted to talk about books with others, but nobody else would listen to her, and this was the only situation where she could talk about books with me freely. I, who couldn't read even though I wanted to, could also listen to her as much as I want. We had a relationship of supporting each other in this sense.

"Y-yeah...it-it's really troubling."

Shinokawa eked out a voice on the bed. Her ears were completely red.

"...It-it must have been troubling...that she said I-I-I'm your girl-girlfriend, Mr. Goura."

"No no no! That isn't it!"

I, who was about to continue on, hurriedly denied it greatly.

"I'm just saying it's troubling that I was misunderstood! I'm not troubled about that! I'm not troubled at all. Rather, I'll say that I'm very happy."

I immediately closed my mouth. That was really an ambiguous line; did it feel like a confession?

"Ah...so we're thinking the same thing...I'm the same."

She said. I had the urge to ask her, ‘How is it like me? Was it about 'it's troubling I was misunderstood'? Or about the 'Rather, I'll say that I'm very happy'?’ --However, I wasted the opportunity while choosing my words.

"Ho-how is it, your rehab? Can you walk now?"

In the end, I asked something unrelated, and moved away from what we were talking about.

"...Ye...yes. I can walk...slightly...with support..."

"Has the discharge date been decided?"

"Not yet...maybe next month?"

"I see."

To a bystander, this conversation was completely bland, but this could be considered an obvious improvement when compared to the past. This person was inapt at talking about anything other than books after all.

I suppose it was time to get down to business. I sat on the round chair, took out a pocket book from a paper bag, and gave it to her to look.

"...Please appraise this book."

Vinogradov Kuzmin Introduction to Logic. It was a rather old book; the book did not seem to be in good condition, as the cover trims and the edges were tattered.

“Ah, it’s Aoki Paperback!”

Even so, she received this book with a beaming smile, and just like last time, was a completely different person from before. She started to stroke the cover slowly in a manner akin to petting a puppy on its head.

“It’s been a while since I last saw it! This book and publisher is no longer around anymore.”

Truly, it was the first time I heard of the name ‘Aoki Paperback’. This book was probably limited in print.

“How much can it fetch?”

“No…this isn’t the case.”

She shook her head regrettably.

“Eh? But this book is rare, right?”

“The book is good, but there isn’t any demand for it in the Antiquarian Book market…the state of this book isn’t too good either. This book can only fetch 500 Yen.”

I widened my eyes. This was completely different from the Sanrio SF Paperback the book watchman Shida brought before.

“Aoki Paperback is a united publisher company, and it published books for around 30 years ever since it started operations in the Fifties. Most of the Social Sciences Idealogy books and the old Communist Literature works are printed by Aoki paperback. This book, Introduction to Logic, is as its name implies, a deciphering of logic. There had been many reprints, and it had always been popular…what was that person like?”

“Hm, he was in the latter stage of his 50s, dressed in a suit…”

At this moment, I paused. Regarding my memory of that customer, there were a few points that couldn’t be explained with just a few mere sentences.

“…What is it?”

“Actually, there’s something I want to tell you. That customer was a little weird…”

“Weird, is it?”

She tilted her head doubtfully.

“Yeah. It’s a long story…”

September had just began, but that man was neatly dressed in a suit, and his tie was fastened all the way to his neck. His hair was combed neatly, and his moustache was cleanly shaved, giving the impression of a bank’s branch manager. However, he had a pair of sunglasses donned, and looked somewhat conspicuous.

The man walked into the shop, and went straight for the counter without looking around. He was tall and lanky, and his skin was of a healthy tan.

“I would like to sell a book here.”

He enunciated each word clearly with a deep voice, and left the Introduction to Logic on the counter. My impression of a bank employee changed slightly in my mind. Perhaps he was a veteran broadcaster, or maybe a commentator.

“The one in charge of appraisal isn’t around. Would you mind leaving the book here for today?”

I managed to explain matters to him properly, at the very least. After 3 weeks, I was somewhat used to the process of welcoming customers in this Antiquarian Bookshop.

“Sure.”

“Thank you very much. Please record your name and address here.”

I placed a sales invoice slip and a ball-point pen on the table, and pointed my finger at the name and address column. The man took off his sunglasses, fished out a pen, and started to write. His name was Masashi Sakaguchi, birthday October 2nd 1950, and lived in Zushi City, right beside Kamakura.

His handwriting was not exceptionally pretty, especially in contrast to his neat attire. Perhaps he wanted to write neatly, but he ended up writing outside of the boxes.

Unwittingly, I noticed an obvious scar at the corner of Sakauguchi’s eye. Perhaps the sunglasses were meant to hide this wound.

It didn’t seem to be an injury he received today or yesterday, and it made his stern expression terrifying. This truly gave a completely different impression to me now. This man was dressed in a neat suit, had an abnormally deep voice and a scar on his face—combining these factors together, I could not tell what kind of work he did, and what kind of person he was. He simply stated ‘company employee’ on the invoice slip’s occupation column.

“This should be enough, right?”

“The price doesn’t matter. If it can’t sell, I’ll take it back.”

“I understand.”

“I will come by again tomorrow afternoon, and I hope the appraisal will be completed by then. If there are any changes to this appointment, please contact me anytime. That is all from me. Is there anything you would like to say?”

There was nothing I wanted to add, but it made me little uneasy.

“No, nothing special.”

“I see. I will leave it to you then.”

Sakaguchi again put on his sunglasses, and left the Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia the same way he walked in.

“…He seemed to be a meticulous person.”

The moment I finished what I wanted to say, Shinokawa spoke.

“Yeah. Maybe he’s someone meticulous, but he felt a little unnatural…well, he just felt a little too meticulous.”

I was not insinuating that Sakaguchi’s actions were weird, but I was very concerned that he immediately answered without hesitation. It seemed like he had already decided on how to answer, as if he had already considered all the possible conversations. Perhaps he really was an extremely meticulous person.

“Is there another reason why you find him a little weird, Mr. Goura?”

I was a little surprised by her question—this person was really intuitive.

“Yeah, there’s still a second part to this.”

I continued. Right, this would be where the problem began.

“An hour after Sakaguchi left…”

I remembered the time was past 2pm; I was having a conversation with the book watchman Kasai, who appeared at the Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia. It seemed he had received some request consisting only of Antiquarian Books through the internet, and did not know how to deal with this as he did not have the relevant knowledge required. He asked Shida for help, and later thought of getting the Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia to help out as well; of course, he would give compensation.

I was thinking it was not a bad thing, but the phone in the shop rang.

“Thank you for your patronage. This is the Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia…”

I picked up the receiver, and was about to report my name, but a high-pitched voice caused my ears to ring.

“Hello, is this the Antiquarian Bookshop? You purchase books here? Did a man called Sakaguchi go over to sell a pocket book? Tall, a little gloomy looking, a stiff-voiced old man. Masashi Sakaguchi. Masa, shi, Saka, guchi…”

At this moment, I recovered from my startled state.

“Well, if you don’t mind, may I know who you are?”

“I’m Sakaguchi’s wife…to be honest, it’s a little awkward to say this so formally. Kukukukuku, seriously!”

For some reason, there was some laughter mixed within the voice. How tense was this person exactly? The man who called himself Sakaguchi was acting weirdly, but this woman who professed to be his wife was acting weirder. Speaking of which, was she really his wife? Is it really alright to say that Sakaguchi came by?

“How about it? Did our family member come over?”

I frowned and pondered. She knew Sakaguchi’s name and that he came here to sell the Pocket Book. Maybe she was really his wife, and there was an emergency.

“…Yes, he did drop by.”

“Is that so? Has he sold that Pocket book yet? Has the ownership been transferred?”

“No. He simply left the book with us. The one in charge of appraisal will do so later.”

“When will it be done?”

“This evening…”

“Then our family member will head over there again. Today? Or tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Understood! Thank you very much! What’s your name?”

“Goura.”

“Mr. Goura? Then, I’ll contact you again, Mr. Goura.”

“Eh?”

I inadvertently asked. What did she mean by that? But she had already hung up.

“…She seemed to be a very lively person.”

Shinokawa cautiously expressed her thoughts. Would this be considered lively? She seemed strangely anticipative.

“What do you think? Something happened between this couple, right?”

She placed a fist at her lips, and pondered for a while. Suddenly, she asked,

“Did Mr. Sakaguchi’s wife drop by at the shop after hanging up?”

“No. Why do you ask?”

“Didn’t she say she would contact you later? I think she wanted to head to the shop.”

“Eh?”

Upon hearing her say this, I supposed this could be what she meant. That person even asked me, who answered the call, for my name.

“But what would she want to do at our shop?”

“She wanted to get the book back before it’s sold, I guess…thus, she asked when we would be appraising the book, and when her husband came by at the shop.”

“Ah…”

I see. After thinking about it, I could understand why she bombarded me with a one-sided barrage of questions—I was not certain, but this would at least explain things.

“Then, is that his wife’s book?”

“Why do you think so?”

“Her aim’s to prevent the book from being sold, right? Maybe it’s her own book that’s going to be sold or something…”

“I don’t think that’s the case.”

Shinokawa shook her head.

“If that were the case, she would have explained matters to you in the first place, Mr. Goura…she’s not the type who can control her emotions, right?”

“…Is that so?”

She didn’t seem to be angry at her husband at all. Or rather, she laughed when she mentioned that she was his wife. If the book was

something her husband sold without her consent, she would have added one or two begrudging words.

“Hm? But in this case, that man called Sakaguchi wanted to sell his book, and his wife wanted to stop him?”

“Yes, that’s how it is.”

Shinokawa showed me the cover of Introduction to Logic. There was a large blue half-crescent stamp under the title. The cover was very plain, and I supposed the old books were all like this.

“This book must have contained some secret.”

She started flipping through the pages as she said so, and I probed my body forward as well. Unlike the ‘Sōseki's Complete Collection’, there was no signature here, and there was no markings on any pages. It seemed the book was not in a good state due to constant reading, not because of abrasive use.

“Then, what study of logic does this book talk about?”

I asked. It was the most basic question, but Shinokawa did not really mind.

“This book introduces syllogism. Hm…a simple example would be, A equals to B, B equals to C; therefore, A equals to C, something like this…”

I searched through my memory. I had heard of this before.

“…Inductive reasoning?”

“Yes. This logic order, if explained through mathematical symbols, would be syllogism. This book was a textbook used by schools in Russia…the Soviet Union back then, and afterwards the book was translated into Chinese. Naturally, the contents consist of an introduction to symbolic logic, and the common questions used inside are very interesting, mostly about ‘Proletariats’[21] and ‘Kolkhoz’[22]. It often includes quotes from Stalin.”

Upon hearing about this logic sequence, I inadvertently thought of the man called Sakaguchi. I suppose his systematic verbal etiquette could be explained by his fondness of such books.

“…This is the first edition.”

Shinokawa said so after flipping over to the publisher’s note. I leaned over to look, and found it was the first edition released on July 1st, 1955.

“It seemed Mr. Masashi Sakaguchi did not buy this from a retail bookshop.”

“How do you know?”

Shinokawa pulled out the invoice slip I placed in the book, and showed me the birthday column. Masashi Sakaguchi, born on October 2nd, 1950—I see. He would be 5 years old at the time the first edition was circulated. This was not a book a kindergartener would buy.

“Did he buy it at an Antiquarian Bookshop?”

“Or maybe someone gave it to him as a present…ah!”

Shinokawa suddenly cried out, and covered her mouth, ostensibly surprised by her outcry. It was rare of her to call out like this.

“…Ah, sorry.”

Her stare was fixated on the last page of Introduction to Logic. A label-like item was ostensibly stuck deliberately on the new edition introduction. There was a ‘personal reading permit’, and a few columns with the words ‘book name’, ‘owner’, ‘permit date’, ‘cell number’. Introduction to Logic was written on the ‘book title’, and the name Masashi Sakaguchi was written on the ‘owner’ column. For some reason, there was a number ‘109’ written above the name.

The ‘permit date’ was October 21st, Year 47. I supposed that was the Shōwa Era rather than the Western Calendar. After that incident with the Sōseki’s Complete Collection the previous month, I memorized the method for calculating the actual year. The 47th year of the Shōwa Era would be 1972. The year presently is 2010, which means this label was most probably stuck on 40 years ago.

“What is it?”

It did not seem to be a library card. ‘Personal reading’ and ‘cell number’ were unfamiliar terms to me.

Shinokawa did not answer me, and merely looked at the ‘Personal reading permit’.

“Shinokawa?”

I raised my voice slightly to call her, and she finally answered.

“…I do occasionally see this since I manage old books.

She seemed to have difficulty articulating as she stammered.

“The books a prison library lends to its inmates are called ‘official’s books’, while the books belonging to the inmates are called ‘personal books’…this is a permit pasted on a ‘personal book’.”

I silently looked down at the 'personal reading permit'. After a while, I finally understood what Shinokawa meant. This permit had Sakaguchi's name on it. in other words—

"That man went into jail before?"

"…Most likely. This '109' is probably the criminal number."

"How did…"

He was eccentric, but he did not seem like the kind who would commit a crime. I never met anyone with a record before, however.

"…Do you want to check if he really served time?"

"Eh? We can?"

"Since we have a clue, we might be able to."

Shinokawa pulled the laptop on the side table close to her, and activated it for me to see. I was hoping for a cute wallpaper, but an image of a book cover appeared instead, which made me a little disappointed. The book name was The Late Years; she certainly liked to read, and I was impressed, rather than surprised by this.

"E-erm, about this…please don't look…"

She immediately blushed, and opened the browser with a click. The side of the notepad computer has a portable data terminal to allow her to access the internet from this ward room. She accessed the database of a renowned news firm, and quickly entered the name 'Masashi Sakaguchi' in the search column.

"Ah."

I understood her intention. If 'Masashi Sakaguchi' had committed an offence, it might appear on the newspapers. I never thought of using such a method to investigate—I tersely stared at the page, and looked through the search results. There were a few large reports, all linking to the same incident. January 9th, 1971, a year before the permit was issued.

"Robbery at Hodogaya Bank/Chase Footage in the day.

There was a robbery at the Hodogaya Branch of the Yokohama City's Sagamino bank on the afternoon of 8th January. A young man broke into the bank with a hunting rifle, stole 400,000 Yen in cash, and escaped on a passenger car parked outside. The police cars arrived at the scene hurriedly pursued after the suspect, stopped at a civilian's residence 1km away when the latter crashed into it, and arrested him. The suspect is an ex-worker living nearby—Masashi Sakaguchi (20 years old), and is now undergoing police investigations."

I was shocked speechless. That man, who looked like a bank employee, was actually a criminal in a bank robbery—it was really unbelievable, but this certainly was the case. The age matched completely, and there was an additional report.

"Sakaguchi's facial region took minor damage when he crashed into the civilian residence wall, and is currently undergoing treatment at the hospital. The police has revealed that this incident isn't affecting the investigation proceedings."

I recalled the wound at the corner of Sakaguchi's eye. It must have been the injury incurred in this situation.

"That guy…really has a record?"

"…Yes."

Shinokawa nodded with a serious look.

"But after this incident, there was no mention of the name 'Masashi Sakaguchi' in the news…this was the only crime he committed. Right now, he must have become a new man."

I too felt this way, but I was a little worried about him not changing his ways for good. Either way, I would be the one dealing with him the next day.

"What do I do with this book?"

"It will be good if you can purchase it like usual. Please tell him this book can be sold for 100 Yen."

It was certainly an appraisal as usual. As she said, no matter who the customer is, it would be expected of us to carry out deals normally—but it would be a lie to say that we were not worried at all.

"But there's something I'm concerned about."

She said as she closed the laptop, and turned herself towards me.

"What is it?"

"Why does Sakaguchi want to sell the book, and why does his wife want to prevent him from selling it?"

"Eh? Isn't it because he doesn't need it anymore?"

“But this is a book he had with him for 40 years, right? He said the price doesn’t matter, so it doesn’t seem to be a matter of money. It’s improbable that he doesn’t have a place to leave this book…why must he sell it?”

I folded my arms. It was true there would have to be a reason to sell a book Sakaguchi kept with him for a long time. Maybe it had something to do with the call his wife made.

At this moment, tapping footsteps rang outside the quiet ward room. We looked back, and saw the door swing open. A petite woman entered.

“Hello! Is this the shopkeeper’s ward room?”

A shrill voice shook my head as it echoed within. She was dressed in a red one-piece, and the ends of her brown hair were curled up. She had double eyelids, a round face, and looked just like a child, but there were wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and lips. She was most likely in her late thirties, and the thick make-up showed the contours on her flat face.

The long gloves used to block off the sunlight felt different however as they were plain in contrast to the rest of her clothing. There was no doubt, however I looked at her, that she was a hostess preparing to go to work.

She narrowed her eyes and looked around.

“There’re a lot of books. This is the first time I’ve seen so many. Is the bespectacled beauty the owner? It’s already the beginning of September, but it’s so hot today. I walked over from Ōfuna Station; it’s really hot out there…ah, sorry. I started talking so much without introducing myself.”

I knew who she was even without her introduction. She formally lowered her head.

“I’m the wife of Masashi Sakaguchi, Shinobu. Please return to me that book!”

Shinobu Sakaguchi smiled as she pulled a round chair over and sat down. There was no pause during this time, and she continued to rattle on. Her face was not notably attractive, but she had a myriad of expressions, and gave a sense of familiarity.

“I went to the shop in Kita-Kamakura before this, and the high school student working there told me the one who knows about this went off to the hospital, so I took the bus here…ah, goodness me. I came to the hospital empty-handed! I’m really sorry, shopkeeper.”

Shinokawa immediately blushed the moment her name was mentioned.

“It-it’s nothing, you don’t have to…erm, I’m Shinokawa…nice to meet you…”

She stammered, and she adjusted her body’s position slightly, ostensibly wanting to hide behind me. Either way, this person would not relax unless we start talking about books. I coughed.

“May I ask, what do you mean about hoping that we return the book?”

“A-are you Mr. Goura? The one who picked up the phone? You’re really tall, taller than our Masa…ah, no, taller than my husband.”

I suppose this Masa would be an abbreviation of the Masashi from Masashi Sakaguchi—for the time being, I did not want to think of this unfitting name.

“Your husband wants to sell the book to us, right?”

“Yes, but there’s definitely a problem! He suddenly said he wanted to sell a book he always treasured, and wouldn’t tell me the reason no matter what. I told him not to sell it, but he wouldn’t listen…I thought I should come here since I want the book back. Well, that man’s rather stiff when he speaks, right?”

“Hm? …well, a little…”

The topic changed suddenly, and it was a little tedious to catch up with her words.

“It seemed to be because of this Introduction to Logic book. He was a very ridiculous man when he was young, and when he was practicing at a monastery, his High School teacher gave him this book, telling him that he could talk with others logically if he read it a few times. It was an amazing book that changed his personality.”

At that moment, Shinokawa and I glanced at each other—monastery?

“…Well, what was that monastery about?”

“Ah, sorry. That fellow from our house left his house after he was 20 years old, and seemed to have spent his time at some monastery for around 5 years. He wasn’t planning on becoming a monk, but it seemed he had to go there because something happened.”

I tried my best to maintain a look of admiration. It seemed this person did not know anything about Sakaguchi’s criminal past, and even talked about some monastery practise.

“Anyway, he said it was a really tough place, with a wall so high he couldn’t get over, and he could only meet visitors for a short while. After he finished his training, he was shocked by how greatly the outside world had changed.”

Wouldn’t that mean our guess is correct here? I inadvertently muttered in my heart. Even after listening to this part, she still did not realize that he was talking about prison; she really has a trusting personality—

No, that was not all. She really had trusted her husband deep down.

“Anyway, I just think it’s better not to sell it, or else I’ll regret it…erm, is that book over there his? Is it possible for me to take it back if you haven’t paid?”

Shinobu Sakaguchi straightened her back and pointed at the Introduction to Logic on Shinokawa’s thighs. She looked ready to snatch it away immediately, and I hesitated on whether I should stop her.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t hand it over.”

Shinokawa said decisively, and unknowingly, she was not hiding behind me, but staring right at Shinobu. This would be her state whenever she talked about books.

Shinobu, who was vehemently refused, widened her eyes.

“Eh? What’s the matter? Why not?”

“Your husband’s the owner of this book, and your husband hopes to sell it…as someone who trades old books, I can’t ignore the wishes of the customers. If you want to stop your husband from selling it, please convince him, and not us.”

Shinokawa held onto the book tightly as she looked down deeply. Shinobu Sakaguchi seemed to have lost her strength as she bent her waist forward. She suddenly became silent, and soon, smiled weakly like what Shinokawa did.

“Hm, that’s true…it’s as you say, shopkeeper. I’m not good at thinking, and I just said something unreasonable…sorry.”

She then sighed and narrowed her eyes at the ceiling.

“But why did he really want to sell it? I feel there’s something wrong with that…he wouldn’t say so himself, and I don’t know if anyone does.”

That would be too much to expect. If his family members didn’t know, how would ‘anyone else’ know—no, there would be someone who would know. I turned my head back to look at Shinokawa; she was someone who was good at solving such mysteries.

“…You have quite a nice relationship with your husband.”

Shinokawa said. Embarrassed, Shinobu grinned as she nodded hard.

“Yes, that’s right. We’re married for almost 20 years already, and we still have quite a sweet relationship even now.”

It seemed the additional use of love lines made it very chummy. Shinokawa too seemed to be affected by her as she smiled.

“How did you first meet your husband?”

I knew she wanted to obtain more information. Shinobu corrected her behavior and leaned her upper body forward to us.

“It will take a long time for me to explain this. Is it alright?”

We nodded silently. She then quickly spoke up without hesitation.

“I first met him in on the year after I graduated High School…”

“At that time, I was working at a hostess…ah, I’m helping out at a friend’s snack bar now. I’m dressed up like this because I have to get to work later.

My relationship with my parents isn’t really good. My parents are very smart, and graduated from good universities; as for me, I was completely inept in my studies, so I had been scolded for being stupid ever since I was young…it would be one thing if I had been passionate about learning, but I really hated it.

Thus, I immediately left home once I graduated from high school. At first, I was a clerk at an ordinary company, but I could not understand anything, and was of no use at all. Half a year later, I was fired.

To live on, I tried all sorts of part-time jobs, but I just kept getting scolded…I thought there would be a job suited for me, so I went to a night pub.

It’s rare to see any of those recently; there has been fewer of them since my youth. There was an old and famous pub at the west exit of Yokohama station, and during my interview there, I was taken in.

As you can see, I can talk quite a lot now, right? At that time, I could talk a lot more. However, a hostess’ job was to take care of customers, but I kept talking about my own things…the customers are all adults; who would be willing to listen to a kid who just graduated from high school. I really intended to work hard, but I just kept getting scolded. My boss told me that he would fire me if this kept up. Just when I was feeling downhearted, that man came to the shop alone.

It was a hot day, but he was dressed neatly in a suit, and his back was straight. He was no different from now, and at that time, he could be considered an old man…of course, he was not married. He said that he would normally not come to a bar with women for a drink, but did so that day to relieve his boredom.

At first, I thought he was a really scary man. He would not talk about himself, and his method of speaking was rather stiff. He was just like my father, and I thought he was a graduate from some good university, and working at some bank. As I thought about that, I tensed up…we never said anything for 30 minutes, and the only thing we did was drinking.

And then, he suddenly spoke up.

“I am not good at talking about myself, but I would like to hear about you. I would be willing to hear you talk about anything, whatever you say.”

The customers in the past would rattle on without care, and this was the first time I heard someone say that I could talk to my heart’s content. I was a little surprised; if he said so, would that not mean that I had to talk? Either way, I started talking about things I could think of, whether it was yesterday’s dinner or the dog I raised when I was young.

I gradually relaxed, and talked about depressing things, like how I nearly got fired. After that, I felt like I was in some counseling session, and I sobbed as I talked about all the misfortunes I had in my life, how I couldn’t do anything because I was too stupid, that I didn’t know where and how I should live on…now that I think about it, he was listening very intently even though I was simply grumbling away.

And then, what happened next was important! After I grumbled so much, I said, “A hostess isn’t the right job for an idiot. I’m not suited as a hostess because I’m so stupid”.”

That man had been listening quietly all this time, but he suddenly put down his wine glass. It was so loud that it shocked me, and I thought he was angry. That was not the case however, and he said to me with a serious expression,

“You just talked using inductive reasoning in what you said just now. A foolish person would not use that…you are definitely not a fool.”

It’s strange, isn’t it? Even after saying it was some inductive reasoning, I understood very well that he was trying to encourage me…I felt a little moved. Nobody had ever encouraged me before.

And then, that man clasped my hands tightly and said to me.

“You are a lot smarter than I was when I was your age…the best vindictive proof of this is that you are using those hands of yours to earn money. No matter when you are scolded for some reason, you do not have to be ashamed.”

…When I heard that, I felt that it was the first time I could allow a man embrace me. No, or rather, I let him embrace me…and he really did. Just like that, I offered myself to him, and we got married. Kukuku, there’s a huge difference in age, he’s a little eccentric, and there’s a lot of gossip, but I don’t really mind what they say. It had been a long time after that, and we have quite the happy life together. That man looks very scary, right? But he’s really gentle. He probably went through all sorts of hardship, and I even felt, sometimes, that it’s a pity for such a rare good man to marry me!”

And after that, Shinobu Sakaguchi continued to talk about her husband’s good points as she proudly raised her chest.

“How about it? He’s really a good man, right?”

During this time, my heart became downhearted, and I started to pity Sakaguchi a little. It would be hard to admit to someone, who trusted in him so much, that he had a criminal record, and it would be reasonable to understand why he said a lie, that he became a monk.”

“Has there been anything weird about your husband recently?”

Shinokawa asked, and Shinobu immediately showed a worried look.

“It started a month ago. He was a little weird; he’s more silent than he was, he doesn’t smile, and wouldn’t look at my eyes anymore…a-and also, the sunglasses! He bought it recently. It’s of poor quality! That’s the weirdest part here!”

I suppose that would be the least important thing. Shinokawa handed the cover of the Introduction to Logic to her for her to see.

“Has he ever let you read this book?”

“Nope.”

She shook her head hard.

“He really treasured it greatly, and I couldn’t understand even if I tried to read it….ah, but when I was cleaning the house the last time, I flipped through it slightly. It was placed in the cutlery shelf of the living room, and there was some dust on it. I picked it up, and flipped through it.”

In other words, she really flipped through it before. It was clear to me from the change in facial expression on Shinokawa’s face—the same face she showed when she discovered the truth behind the Sōseki's Complete Collection.

“…Was your husband around that time?”

“Was he…ah, well, maybe. I let him go to the corridor when I was cleaning, and he was listening to the radio on the Veranda. Recently, he liked to listen to the radio…”

“Is that so…”

Shinokawa muttered softly. I too think I knew the truth—the ‘private reading permit’ label pasted in this book can prove that Masashi Sakaguchi had a criminal record. If it were discovered, it might cause the marriage life to break up. He must have thought of that, and it was to be expected of me to move this danger as far away as possible.

“Then, can you please lend me this book? I want to look at it.”

Shinobu’s words caused me to widen my eyes, and Shinokawa too seemed to look reluctant.

“Ah, I won’t bring it home. I just want to know what sort of book it is. Now that I think about it, I never read through it. Hey, a little peek is

alright, right?"

She smiled and reached her hand out innocently. Before I realized it, I spoke up,

"Well, there might be something he doesn't want anyone to see…"

"Mr. Goura!"

Shinokawa reminded me, causing me to recover. Not good, I nearly said some unnecessary things—but Shinokawa shook her head.

"…No, that isn't it."

"Eh?"

Was I wrong? What did I say exactly that was wrong?

During the span he spent serving prison time, Sakaguchi had a book with the Introduction to Logic with the 'private reading permit' label pasted on it. His wife flipped through the book recently, and he came to our shop to sell the book—either way, he did this to hide the fact that he had a criminal record. Is there any other reason?

"What is it? What's the matter?"

Shinobu compared our expressions, and finally landed her sights upon the Introduction to Logic.

"Is there something in this book?"

Shinokawa did not answer. The ward room was completely silent—I was regretting over my carelessness. If I let her see this book, maybe she would understand the reason of our uneasiness was the 'private reading permit'. But even so, it would be more suspicious not to let her see. We didn't know what to do.

At this moment, there was a knock on the door. I heaved a sigh of relief.

"…Please come in."

Shinokawa answered, and the ward room door opened slightly. A tall man dressed in suit and sunglasses. He was panting away, ostensibly anxious.

"Ah, Masa!"

Shinobu waved her hand happily.

Masashi Sakaguchi was the one who appeared.

"Sit here. Over here."

Shinobu Sakaguchi pulled a round chair over and brought it beside her. Masashi Sakaguchi then sat on that chair slightly. They looked very intimate when seated together, and looked more like a daughter who returned home after a long time and a father, rather than a couple.

"Why did you come here, dear?"

"There're some changes in the plans tomorrow. I called the Antiquarian Bookshop, and heard that you went to the hospital, so I came by."

Sakaguchi frowned as he said, and added on with an unchanging expression,

"If possible, I hope you don't call me 'Masa' in front of outsiders. Did I not mention it before?"

"Ah, sorry. Erm, Masa…shi! Don't sell the book!"

She suddenly touched upon the crux of this case, and Masashi pulled his lips in.

"Sorry, this is something I decided. I decided to sell it because I feel I have no need for it."

"Why do you say you don't need it anymore!? Didn't you always treasure that book that much?"

Shinobu said as she pointed at the Introduction to Logic.

"But even I was seduced by that book! Doesn't it have the syllogism theory written inside? It's a book full of memories to me too!"

"…I have no intention of complaining."

"It's the same since I felt I was being seduced! Didn't you kiss me after you confessed!?"

Sakaguchi glanced over at us. His expression had not changed, but large drops of sweat were dripping down his neck. He was really pitiful; because such a woman mentioned this, even the secret matters between husband and wife was revealed.

"At least tell me the real reason why you want to sell this book. You've been acting weird recently. You don't really talk much now, you don't seem energetic, and you're wearing those sunglasses! Anyway, you just look weird!"

It seemed she was very insistent against those sunglasses, but upon hearing her words, Sakaguchi's stared turned away somewhat. Why did it waver? Did it waver because of the sunglasses?"

"…Mr. Sakaguchi."

Shinokawa slowly said.

"The people around you will soon know. It's not something you can hide…this is something different from the rest."

She spoke with more emphasis at the end. It was a little weird; she was clearly hinting that there was another secret beside the fact that he had a criminal past. I suddenly recalled her saying 'that's not it'—what exactly will the people around him know of?

"Hm…"

Sakaguchi's face became pale. It seemed he realized that Shinokawa was talking about his criminal past. The eyes behind the sunglasses narrowed, and he stared at us again.

"It seems like you know everything."

I nearly raised my hand—no, I did not understand. What other secret was there other than the incident 40 years ago? How did Shinokawa find out? I should have known everything she knew.

"I understand that you aren't good at talking about yourself."

Shinobu said.

"But if there's anything troubling you, please, just tell me."

Sakaguchi slowly removed his sunglasses. He stared at his wife's face for quite some time, and after that, spoke calmly with a quiet voice.

"…Even from up close, I can no longer see your face clearly. I cannot tell whether your eyes are opened or closed."

"Eh…"

His wife cried out in surprise.

"I have an eye illness. My eyeballs have accumulated excess liquid, and unfortunately, they cannot be treated. The unlucky thing is that my eyes were injured when I was young. Thus, the worsening of the illness accelerated…I am selling that book because I can no longer read it."

Silence descended upon the room again. Sakaguchi turned towards us,

"How did you know? I wanted to keep it all hushed."

I wanted to know too—was there any clue in whatever we talked about? I turned my head back to look at the bed, and Shinokawa confidently said,

"…This note is the crux."

She pulled out the sales invoice from the Introduction to Logic. Sakaguchi leaned over to look at the tip of her hand.

"This is what you wrote in our shop, Mr. Sakaguchi. The words are outside the boxes…this is a weird thing for someone with a meticulous personality."

"…To think I didn't even notice that I wrote outside the boxes."

Sakaguchi muttered in a self-deprecating manner.

"Now I cannot see clearly what I write anymore…you knew just from that alone?"

"No. I learned of this when I asked your wife about your recent activities. You started listening to the radio because you have difficulty reading the newspaper, you wore sunglasses to protect your eyes from direct sunlight, and the book you never flipped open even though it was covered with dust…is because your eyesight's worsening."

I was dumbfounded. Now that she mentioned it, it certainly was the case.

Even so, she never had a conversation with Sakaguchi before. She even knew he was hiding something from his wife just from the news; she was really intuitive.

"…But, why wouldn't you tell your wife?"

I asked Sakaguchi. Normally, he would first tell his family members in such circumstances. However, Sakaguchi suddenly lowered his eyes.

"I may lose my eyesight, and from now on, I will probably have to rely on others for help. I am almost going to retire from my current company, and there will be no chances of me being reemployed after this. We may end up on hard times…and she really suffered a lot for marrying me despite our difference in age. I need to clear my thoughts before I confess."

Sakaguchi lifted his eyes and looked at my face. For the first time, I discovered he was unable to look right at me, for he was unable to see clearly.

"It is true that some things are harder to reveal to your family. There might be a lot of people who think otherwise, but I am not one of them."

I knew he was talking about his criminal past. Sakaguchi was someone who lived with such a huge secret. Perhaps the act of being honest was something he was resistant against.

“I am really sorry for hiding it from you up till now.”

He lowered his head towards his wife. Shinobu Sakaguchi frowned as she folded her arms. This unhappy expression did not match her too much, probably because she looked like a child. After a whole, she spoke with that shrill voice from before.

“I don’t really understand, Masa.”

She called Sakaguchi by that name again, and this time, the latter did not point this out,

“…What do you not understand exactly?”

“Why do you want to sell that book?”

“Did I not say it? I can no longer read it. Books are existences that are meant for reading, and I hope to hand it over to someone else rather than throw it away…”

“Can’t I read it out loud instead?”

She nonchalantly said so, and then continued on as she looked at the stunned Sakaguchi,

“This is a book you really treasure, right, Masa? I’ll read it to you every day. I never recited before, so maybe my reading will be bad. Hey, isn’t this good enough?”

She bare her teeth as she grinned.

“It’s fine even if you have difficulty saying it. No matter whether you can see or not, Masa, I’ll always be with you…then, if there’s anything you want to say to me, I can hear you…I’ll definitely be happier here.”

Sakaguchi remained silent like a sculpture, and after a while, the edges of his lips showed a smile.

“…I understand. Thank you.”

He stood up, and approached Shinokawa’s bed.

“Sorry, but I do not want to sell that book anymore. Can you please hand it to me?”

Shinokawa nodded deeply, and handed Sakaguchi the Introduction to Logic.

“Of course. Please have it back.”

With the Pocket Book in his hands, Sakaguchi returned to his wife.

“Do you still have some time before work? I want to find some place to talk about future plans.”

“Right, no problems.”

Shinobu Sakaguchi said as she stood up. I was finally relieved, at least, that this incident was seemingly resolved without revealing that Sakaguchi had a criminal past. There was no doubt that Shinokawa intended to let them talk after discovering what happened to Sakaguchi’s eyes.

As for whether the past will be revealed, it would take Sakaguchi a long time to decide—

“…Actually, there is something else I want to say.”

Sakaguchi suddenly spoke up. At this point, I was still immersed in relief, and his wife looked up at her husband doubtfully.

“What is it?”

“I have a criminal record.”

“Eh?”

Instead of Shinobu Sakaguchi, Shinokawa, and I were the ones who inadvertently called out. He barely managed to keep his criminal past a secret, so why must he say so now?

“I lied when I said I went to become a monk. When I was 20, I was fired from my job, and I did not have money to pay for food the next day…I thought that no matter what I did, I had to get a large sum of money so that I would not have to worry for my life. I stole a car and a hunting rifle from my friend’s home, robbed a nearby bank, and of course, I was immediately arrested.”

He calmly explained his criminal past like a news report. Shinobu widened her mouth in shock as she stared at her husband’s face. Sakaguchi then pointed at the wound on the corner of his eye.

“This wound was caused by that incident…I apologize for hiding matters from you up till now.”

Sakaguchi lowered his head deeply. I could not see his expression, but his back was obviously trembling. As I looked on, my palms were all sweaty from the tension; this was the heaviest confession he made in 20 years.

His wife took a deep breath and looked up at his face from below. She was the one to break this long silence.

“Seriously, why’re you so serious here…are you thinking about something?”

She then held her husband by the arms.

“I knew about that already.”

“Eh?”

Both Shinokawa and I cried out again. For this short while, we were shocked by these two.

“You knew…?’

Sakaguchi lifted his eyes as he asked.

“Yes. Anyone who isn’t an idiot would know.”

She gave her husband a meaningful smile.

“I’m not an idiot, right? That’s why I already knew it…ah, this is syllogism, right?”

“Ah, yes…that is right.”

The two of them looked behind, nodded at us, and then walked out of the ward room with their elbows intertwined.

“…It really is the correct choice to get married with you.”

Sakaguchi’s muttering rang at the end, and the door closed again.

The room looked exceptionally spacious after the Sakaguchi couple left, and it seemed a typhoon had just left completely.

“…When did she find out?”

I said. Perhaps it was when they were living together, or maybe it was by some chance. However, Shinokawa shook her head.

“No, she actually did not know.”

“Eh, didn’t she say she knew?”

“If she really knew, she would not have talked about her husband’s past so happily. She would have been very cautious to prevent us from knowing this secret.”

I recalled Shinobu Sakaguchi’s words. It was true that if she had realized her husband’s criminal past, she would not have talked about ‘becoming a monk’ so easily.

“But why did she make such a lie…”

“If she said that she did not know, the situation would be that her husband had lied to his wife for 20 years. This itself is fact, but Sakaguchi had been troubled; he had yet to confess about his illness at all. She did not want him to feel guilty again…I think this is the reason. There is no other way to explain this.”

“Ah…”

I let out a cry of amazement. If that was really true, she did not falter when told of her husband’s shameful past, and even lied with a smile. As Sakaguchi had said, she really was not a fool.

“I feel that Sakaguchi too realized his wife was lying. Logically thinking, his wife’s words did not match…but there was no meaning in revealing this lie. He saw that it was most appropriate to accept his wife’s graciousness.”

It had always been like this, but I was truly astounded by this person. I inadvertently felt that she could solve any mystery as long as it had anything to do with old books.

I stared at the side of Shinokawa’s face. She talked a lot about books during the past three weeks, but I did not know a lot about her personally. All I knew was that she liked old books, and liked to talk about anything relating to that. I suppose that she, like Masashi Sakaguchi, found difficulty in expressing herself.

That did not matter, I guess. At this point, I felt happy too.

“I should head back to the shop then.”

I left the shop to Shinokawa’s little sister. Perhaps she was angry because I never returned.

I straightened my back, only to stop what I was doing. Shinokawa’s white fingers were tugging at a corner of my shirt, and she gave a pondering stare.

“…What is it?”

Suddenly, I felt my entire body heat up. This was a first for me. I sat down on the chair again.

“If I, like Mr Sakaguchi, am hiding something, what would you do?”

“Eh…?”

“Would you like to hear the truth?”

It seemed she read what I was thinking. I was doubtful. What exactly happened?

“…I want to hear.”

My mind was fuzzy, but I answered firmly. She checked that the door was shut, and slowly spoke with a soft voice.

“Mr. Goura, you asked me before…why I was injured.”

“Ah, yes…”

“Two months ago, I went to the residence of my father’s friend. It was a house built on a slope, and I suddenly slipped on the way up the stone steps…it was raining really heavily…so I gave an excuse, saying that I slipped.”

“…But that isn’t the truth?”

She nodded. Unknowingly, we were close enough to a point where our foreheads could meet.

“I never told this to anyone…but is it fine for me to tell you, Mr. Goura?”

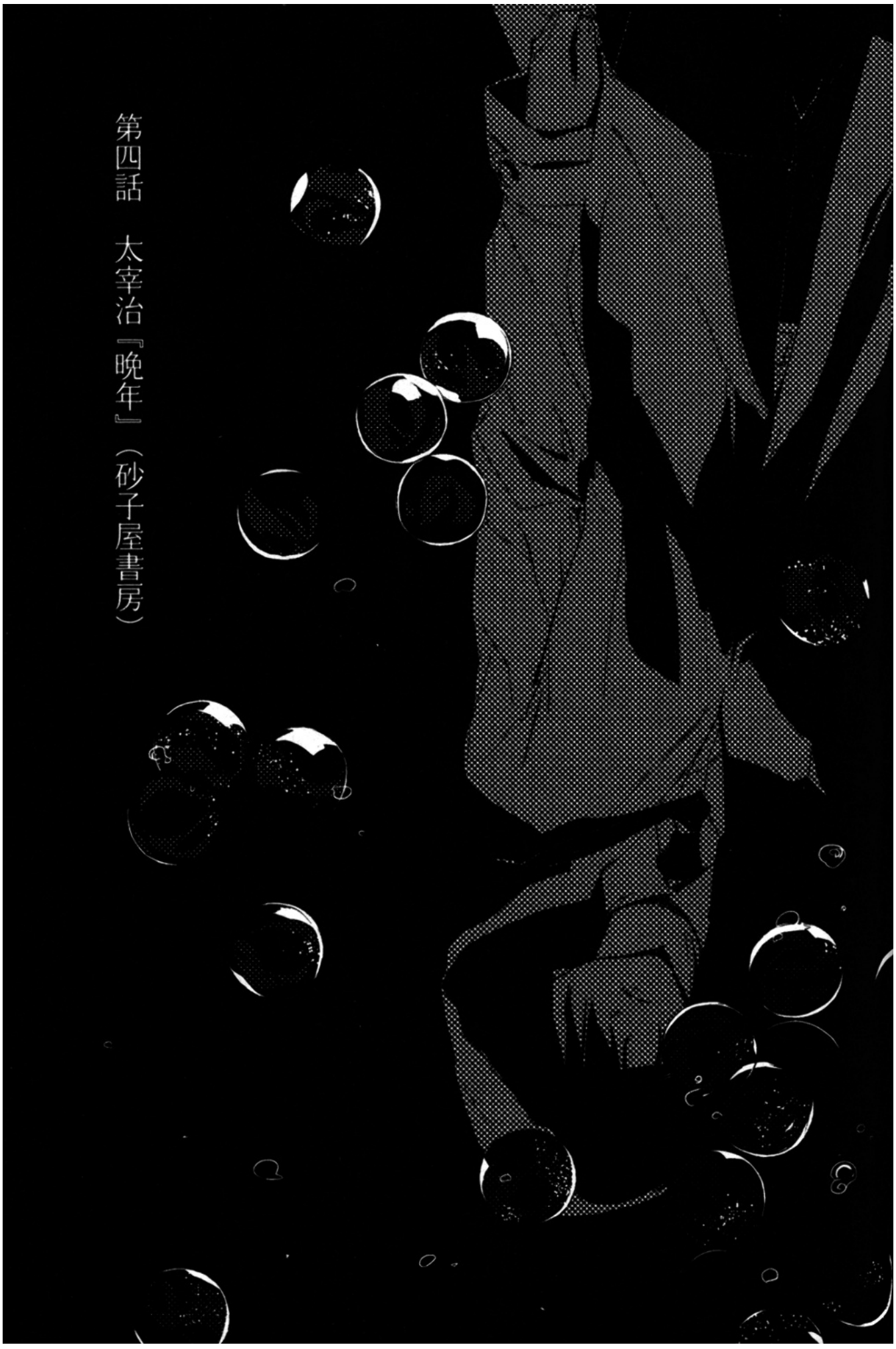
“…Yes.”

I answered. My heart was being faster; for some reason, I felt that I was about to hear something terrifying.

“I was pushed down the stone steps. I had been looking for this culprit during these two months.”

Shinokawa stared at me, her eyes were filled with a strong will within—it was the expression whenever she solved a mystery.

Chapter 4 - Osamu Dazai "‘‘The Late Years’’" (Sunagoya Bookstore)


第四話　太宰治『晩年』（砂子屋書房）

Before anyone realized, it was pitch black outside the window, and the other colors seemed diluted, ostensibly dissolved into the scenery. An evening shower had abruptly descended as if it was midsummer.

With the shop devoid of customers, I arranged the contents of the glass case, and at the same time listened to the sound of rain falling on the ''Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia''. The wagon stacked with 100 Yen pocket books was covered with a waterproof sheet. I looked over at the nearby Kita-Kamakura Station platform, and saw that people were waiting for the buses under the platform's roofs. Only a few boarding platforms were sheltered, however.

I noticed that there were still books scattered on the counter, and as I hurried back into the shop, the door leading to the main house opened. A 16-17 year old girl appeared, dressed in a T-shirt with a wide hem and jeans. Having washed her face after returning from school, her bangs were blown dry, and tied up with a band. This girl was Shinokawa's little sister, Ayaka Shinokawa.

"Ahh, it's raining!"

She exclaimed. In the past, she would have rolled her eyes at me, but recently, we've become rather cordial in our relationship. Her attire at this point seemed a little too unrestrained to me, and I was rather worried about her. Had she completely forgotten that I was an outsider?

"Any customers today?"

"Not a lot… it's a work day today."

I answered as I continued with my work in front of the glass case.

"So we aren't doing so well after all. Our shop's not going to close down now, right?"

As she calmly stated such ominous words, I merely frowned and refrained from saying anything. It was month ago when I first began work here, and I knew that the sales had decreased a lot compared to the past. Besides, it had been two months since the shop owner, who should be the one doing the sales, last appeared. It would have been a wonder if sales hadn't decreased.

I placed a book, wrapped in paraffin, on the rack. The cover, which was slightly faded and whitened, had the words ''The Late Years''. The yellow paper wrapper around it had the recommendations of Haruo Satō and Masuji Ibuse.

"Eh? That book!?"

Ayaka Shinokawa yelled out in surprise.

"Isn't that the very expensive book placed at at my house a long time ago? Who's the author again? He's famous. O-O-O-O…"

"…Osamu Dazai[23]."

I helped her finish what she wanted to say. This was the collection of Osamu Dazai's first works, published in the 11th year of the Showa Era—but it was a pity that I didn't know the contents of the book as I could not read.

"So this book is being sold too? My sister had already insisted that she would never sell this book no matter the situation. So the sales revenue has been really bad after all?"

While I was about to lock the glass case, I glanced at the girl's face that reflected off it.

"…Have there been any customers who asked to buy the book recently?"

"Nope, not at all."

She shook her head sideways as she chuckled secretly.

"You're talking like my sister now. She would always ask me that too… Did any customer express their interest in buying this book? If there are any, contact me immediately. Hey, is there something important?"

"No… not at all."

I lied. The details were a secret between Shinokawa and me.

Shinokawa's younger sister was right beside me, staring at ''The Late Years'' behind the glass. She then muttered.

"I say, this is from the safe in my sister's ward room."

"Hm, well…"

"Was this book so clean in the first place…?"

At that moment, I stopped what I was doing. While she did not seem like her older sister, she was unexpected sharp. She immediately probed into the critical points I did not think of.

"I think it was a lot dirtier the last time I saw it… at the edges, I guess."

I didn't want her to get involved in this. What do I do to stop her from looking on? —just when I was burdened by this, a blue-white light flashed outside the shop, and a thunderclap that shook the air followed immediately afterwards.

"Ooh!"

Ayaka Shinokawa let out a strange cry. She did not seem shocked, but rather amazed. She gently tottered over to the glass sliding door, and looked up at the black thunderous clouds.

“That was amazing. It must have landed nearby!”

There were a lot of hills in Kita-Kamakura; it was not an uncommon sight for the metal towers built on the peaks to be struck by lightning.

I inadvertently thought about the hospitalized Shinokawa. Right now, she must have been looking up at the sky alone in the ward room. Perhaps she hated lightning. On that day 2 months ago, Shinokawa was pushed down the stone steps; it was a stormy day, just like how it was now.

I heard Shinokawa’s secret a week ago, right after the Sakaguchi couple left the ward room.

“…You were pushed down? What do you mean?”

It was hard for me to immediately comprehend when she suddenly mentioned she was ‘pushed down’.

“Before talking about this, there’s something I want to show you.”

She undid the first button of her pajamas as she said so. The profile of her collarbone below the head was clearly visible to me. I widened my eyes as I stiffened, and she reached her hand into her chest right in front of me.

She took out a little key she wore on her neck, and handed the key with lingering skin warmth over to me.

“…Please take out what’s in the safe.”

She pointed to the safe beside her bed. There was certainly a small safe right under the rack, but up until this point, I never thought that there was something inside.

I followed her instructions, and opened the safe. There was a rectangular object wrapped in purple fukusa[24] inside, and it felt very light in my hands. I sat back on my seat, unraveled the wrapping, and uncovered a book wrapped in paraffin paper in front of me. The cover had the name ‘‘The Late Years’’ printed in front of me, and Haruo Satou’s recommendation was printed at the top.

For an old book, it was in considerably good condition, and I could tell this was a previously owned book. I did hear of the name ‘‘The Late Years’’ before. If I remembered correctly—

“‘‘The Late Years’’ is the debut collection of works by Osamu Dazai. This is the First Edition released by Sunagoya Bookstore in the 11th year of the Showa Era.”

I nodded. I’ve never read it before, but I was interested in it.

“My grandfather obtained this book from his friend. My grandfather handed it down to my father, and my father to me. It is not a commercial product, but rather my personal collection.”

I flipped through the pages a few times, and found something abnormal about this book. There were bunches of pages held together by strings on the sides, and I could only skip through the bundles, unable to read. This was the first time I saw such a book.

“…Is this book printed wrongly?”

She silently shook her head.

“It’s uncut.”

“Uncut?”

“Normally, a book is bound together by strings like this, and the fore edge, top and bottom are neatly cut away. An uncut book is a book that is published without any cutting…there were a lot of books printed in such a manner.”

“Then how do I read this?”

“Cut it open with a paper knife and read it like that.”

I see, As I marveled at this, my hands stopped—in this case, nobody read this copy of ‘‘The Late Years’’ before. Was it because it was a very valuable book?

“Huh…”

I found something strange again. Just when I flipped to the inside cover, I found fine writing written there.

“To all living things, live on with confidence We are all to become sinners.”

The name ‘Osamu Dazai’ was added on the side. Suddenly, I felt ominousness from this book.

“Is this… the real thing?”

I knew the answer before she nodded. This was obviously different from the fake signature I saw in Sōseki's Complete Collection. It felt as if an author from the past, whose name was the only thing I knew of, had suddenly come to life in front of me.

“‘The Late Years’’ was a book published when Dazai was 27 years old. It is an anthology of short stories he wrote before, but there was no story titled ‘‘The Late Years’’.”

“Then, why is it called ‘‘The Late Years’’?”

“Dazai intended for it to be his testament work when he wrote it. He tried to drown himself with a woman before he became active as a novelist. It was at Koshigoe, just a little near this place… of course, he went through many suicide attempts later on.”

I knew about that point. It seemed he jumped into the Tamagawa Canal together with a mistress.

“There were only 500 copies of the First Edition printed. These pretty books were all released in uncut form, and each book had a wrapper and signature on it. I guess there are no other existing copies of this edition left… I don’t plan to do this, but if it were sold at our shop… I’d intend to price it above 3 million Yen.”

I gulped. Up until this point, I had never touched such an expensive item, let alone a book.

“But to me, the value of this book has nothing to do with the price. What Osamu Dazai wrote on the inside cover is the most important thing to me.”

I again looked at Dazai’s handwriting. “To all living things, live on with confidence We are all to become sinners.”—those were some really small neurotic words. The word ‘sinners’ seemed like it was written with more weight. I didn’t know how to describe it, but it was a line that could touch my heart.

“He must have written those words to encourage an acquaintance when he gave this book. I saw a signature book with a similar line written in it… I think the term ‘sinners’ encompasses what the author was reflecting over. This book does not have a record of it, but this line did appear in the short story Seagull.”

I repeated the term ‘sinners’ in my mouth over and over again.

“…Is he saying that everyone is evil?”

“I do not believe in this entirely… my understanding is that those who live on have a heavy burden of responsibility.”

Because everyone has a heavy burden, we might as well live on with confidence. Is this what he meant? —I didn’t know if this encouragement was optimistic or pessimistic.

“I really like it because it seems like he’s talking about himself. This is the kind of line I’d like to hear…”

I inadvertently widened my eyes. This was probably the first time I heard Shinokawa talk about her thoughts. I was surprised by her comment ‘heavy burden’; perhaps she was saying that she liked the books.

“There is someone who likes the same line as I do, a fanatical fan of Dazai… that man pushed me down the steps.”

She lowered her head and stared at her legs, outstretched to the front.

“…Who is that?”

“I do not know his real name or identity either… the only thing I could conclude was that he wanted this, ‘‘The Late Years’’.”

Unknowingly to me, the light of the sun outside started to look weaker, and Shinokawa began to calmly explain what happened to her.

“I did just mention that this book is not a commercial product, but something I got when I inherited this shop. Father told me that I could do whatever I wanted with it when the time comes… but I always kept it inside the house, and never showed it to anyone else… other than that one time.”

“…That one time?”

“Do you know of the Museum of Literature in Hase[25]?”

I nodded. I once went there before. The building, modified from an old Western-styled house, displayed famous original works and other materials related to the authors. It was ostensibly a museum for literature, and it was the tourist attraction of Hase along with the Kamakura Buddha.

“Last year was the 100th year anniversary of Osamu Dazai’s birth[26], and the Musuem had an exhibition. The Museum requested me to display my copy of ‘‘The Late Years’’, so I lent the book.”

I vaguely recalled that I did hear of this somewhere before—or rather, I saw it somewhere. Either way, I simply knew about this.

“I think I saw this on the Internet before. It stated that our shop did lend some books for the exhibition…”

That was when I first started work here. When I searched for ‘‘Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia’’ on the Internet, I found this message in a forum full of old book hobbyists. In that case, they were probably referring to this copy of ‘‘The Late Years’’.

“Yes, that is the one…”

Shinokawa showed a gloomy expression as she nodded.

“The Museum’s exhibition hid the fact that our bookstore lent the book, but someone discovered it. My grandfather and father did show

this book to customers visiting our shop before… but the problem is that now a lot of people know that I have this book. Once the exhibition ended, I received an email."

She opened her notepad computer, and the background light of the LCD brightened the dim room a little. I stared at the screen, and saw an anonymous email sent to Shinokawa.

To ''Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia'', Miss Shinokawa.

"'Hello, my name is Yōzō Ōba.

A few days ago, I was passing through Kamakura, visited the Literature Museum on the way here, and was able to see Osamu Dazai's ''The Late Years'' provided by your shop. It was a beautiful book that took my breath away, and the words of advice written together with the signature were riveting.

To all living things, live on with confidence. We are all to become sinners.

'***Please sell the book to me immediately, and keep this email anonymous. Please include the sum of money you want, your bank account, freight method and all related information to this email."***

"…When I first saw this email, I thought it was a prank."

"Eh? Why do you think so?"

I could not help but interrupt. The message was filled with excitement within, but there didn't seem to be anything strange about this.

"Because of this name. Yōzō Ōba… this is the name of the protagonist in the short story ''Petals of Buffonery'' as part of the collection in ''The Late Years''.[27]"

So that was how it was. I nodded. In other words, this was a fake name.

"It was also strange that a deal involving so much money was not made through the phone, but through email… either way, I had no intention of selling this book. Thus, I wrote a reply, stating at this book was not a commercial product in our shop, but part of a personal collection. Then, I got another email less than 5 minutes later."

She pointed at the email folder; the next email was titled 'Please state your price', and it seemed he arbitrarily entered negotiations for pricing. She then pointed at the next message, titled 'The importance of that book to me'. Then, she pointed at the next one—at this point, I felt a chill on my back.

Ōba had sent hundreds, no, thousands of emails in that folder. I didn't know many pages went by before we finally reached the last page. He was as obsessed as a stalker, but he directed it at a book rather than a person.

"I did discuss this with the police before, but these emails alone weren't enough for the police to get involved. He had used a free email account from overseas, and they were unable to ascertain his identity… just when I was wondering if I should ignore him, this man came to the shop."

"At that time, the rainy season had yet to end, and I was alone in the shop. A man carrying a large tourist bag and dressed in suit bent down and walked in through the sliding door.

I could not see his appearance clearly as he had a large mask and sunglasses on. He was very tall, and did not seem very old.

"My name is Yōzō Ōba"

He gave his name softly, took out a bundle of cash from his bag, and left it on the counter.

"There is 4 Million Yen here. Please sell the book to me."

He started to persuade me.

"I wanted to collect the first edition works of other authors, but I really want to get the first edition of Dazai's work. This copy of ''The Late Years'' with the added author's words is something perfect to a collector like me, and I like to buy it no matter what."

I was shocked, and I barely managed to cut his words off before I returned the money to him… I repeated what I said in the email, that this was a book my father handed down to me, that I really liked it, that this was the only book I definitely would not sell. After I said that, he asked me:

"You won't let go of it no matter what'?"

…I told him yes, and he leaned his body forward.

"I like this book too. No matter how many years and how many obstacles there are, I want to get it."

He said these words before leaving the shop. I suddenly felt really fatigued… he would certainly come by the shop again, and I did not know what to do to convince him.

That day, after I closed the shop, I went to my father's friend house that was nearby. I was going to return a book father borrowed when he was still alive… it was raining heavily that day, and I was hurrying up the stone steps. I was using the umbrella, and the book was in my clutches; I was practically looking only at my feet.

Just when I was about to finish climbing the stone steps, I found that man was standing right at the top. I raised my umbrella, and just when I was about to lift my head and see his face, he pushed my shoulder forcefully.

I missed my footing, and rolled all the way down to the bottom. My body could not move at all, and I realized that I was seriously injured. I wanted to call for help, but my consciousness was a little blurred… I heard the sound of someone walking down the steps.

“What? You didn’t bring the book?”

I heard him say this regretfully. The rain was really loud, but I could tell that this was the voice of Yōzō Ōba. His voice was very unique, deep yet clear… somewhat like yours, Mr. Goura.

“Where is that book?”

Ōba continued to ask me… I finally realized that he was after ‘‘The Late Years’’. Of course, I did not want to hand it to him.

“I hid it in a safe place. I won’t tell you where it is.”

I answered with all the strength I could muster. Actually, I locked it in a cupboard, so it was not really safe… anyway, I just wanted to keep that book away from Ōba’s clutches as much as I could.

It seemed Ōba wanted to say something else, but the sound of a car approaching came from afar. He hurriedly whispered into my ear.

“Don’t tell anyone about this. If you do, I’ll burn your bookshop. Stop being stubborn and hand me that book over quietly… I will contact you again soon.”

That was all I could remember, and I found myself lying on the hospital bed again when I woke up. I never told anyone else about this, and put ‘‘The Late Years’’ in the ward room’s safe. There are people in this hospital all the time, so it’s a lot safer than leaving it in my house. He never contacted me during these two months, and of course, I never contacted him…”

“P-Please wait.”

I, who had been listening silently up till this point, interrupted Shinokawa.

“In other words, you never told the police either?”

“Not at all.”

I was shocked by her attitude as she seemed to think her answer was a matter of course.

“Why? You were nearly killed…”

“Because I have no idea who and what kind of person Yōzō Ōba is.”

She answered:

“Even if the police start to investigate, they can’t arrest him immediately. If he finds out that I reported it to the police, he might really burn the bookshop or do something similar… I can feel his determination, and I want to completely eliminate the risk of losing the shop.”

“B-But, if you leave that kind of person alone…”

“Yes, that’s why if he appears at the shop again, I will call the police. I had been thinking about what to do in the ward room all this while.”

She suddenly lifted her face, and her gaze behind her glasses was filled with intense will. Her black eyes were widened, just like the moments before she unraveled book-related mysteries. She reached her hand over and clasped my hand tightly.

“Can you help me to lure Yōzō Ōba out? I don’t know what will happen, but I can only ask this of you, Mr. Goura.”

Her white hand was very warm, and I was rooted to the ground, ostensibly thunderstruck. I can only ask this of you, this line echoed in my ears. It would probably be a rarity for an introverted person like her to open her heart to anyone else. Also, she had asked this from me.

“…Understood. I’ll help you.”

Of course, my answer was a definite yes—I nodded my head and held her hand tightly. Her slender fingers were completely clasped within my fist.

“Thank you…erm, sorry… for getting you involved in this…”

“It’s fine…but I would like to ask for one condition.”

“…Condition?”

She tilted her head aside in surprise.

“Can you please describe the contents of Osamu Dazai’s ‘‘The Late Years’’? I’ve never read it before.”

Her expression immediately brightened, just like the moments whenever she saw a book—no, perhaps she was smiling a lot brighter than that. I too was affected by her, and I smiled too.

“Of course… I will definitely describe it to you after this matter is settled.”

Our relationship was maintained through books. It was a relationship between one who wanted to talk about them, and one who wanted to hear about them. After a lot of conversations in this ward room, we still managed to maintain such an inexplicable relationship, yet seemed to have closed the distance between us. At least, I had become a reliable person she could trust, and of course, I trusted her too.

“Then, how do we lure him out?”

I asked. Yōzō Ōba too must have considered the risk of getting arrested by the police, and he would definitely try to avoid contact with us as much as possible.

“Yōzō Ōba wants to get this book no matter what… well, do you know of the story when a thief entered my house?”

“Eh? …Ahh, yes.”

I remembered Shinokawa’s little sister mentioned this in passing when I just started work there. It seemed, from her story, that the thief did not steal anything.

“I don’t have any proof, but I feel this was also a job ordered by that Ōba… he wanted to steal it rather than make a deal for it. At that time, I had already moved ‘‘The Late Years’’ here.”

I too felt that what she said was a very large possibility. Yōzō Ōba would go to any lengths to complete his objective, and naturally, he could also sneak into someone else’s house.

“Right now, the thing he really wants to know is where ‘‘The Late Years’’ is… so to lure him out, we need to create bait.”

“Bait?”

Shinokawa took out another package wrapped in fukusa from the hill of books beside her. She unwrapped it, and another book wrapped in paraffin paper appeared in front of my eyes—I widened my eyes. That book was ‘‘The Late Years’’ with a yellow wrapper around it, exactly the same as the book on my lap.

“Is this another book?”

It too was in an uncut state. Would that not be an extremely valuable book?

“No.”

She shook her head.

“This is the Home Library Promotion Publishing Reprint from the 1970s… a replica. It is hard to determine if it’s the real thing without looking inside.[28]”

I stared at the reprinted version of ‘‘The Late Years’’. As a book, it looked similar on the outside; no, the reprint’s version had firmer pages, and there were less stains on the cover—I felt it lacked the antique feel of age and sombreness of the original.

“…Will someone think of buying it even if it’s not the original?”

“The reprint is similar to the original version, there are some hobbyists who would want to read it. This reprint was made very intricately too, and there were many releases… I have the original edition here, but I also bought a few copies.”

‘‘Is that so?’’ I was a little skeptical, and she continued,

“Please price this book at 3.5 million Yen and place it in the glass case at our shop. I will update the news on the shop’s homepage, stating that the first edition of ‘‘The Late Years’’, in perfect condition, is in stock… once he knows that the book he wants to get is going to be sold, Yōzō Ōba will definitely come over to our shop and buy it. He would come by once, simply to check the condition; if he does, please call the police, Mr. Goura.”

I understood what she meant. This reprint version would be the bait to lure out Ōba. We could use the real one as bait, but it might get snatched away. This was a decent plan at least—but will things turn out the way we want so easily?

“But I don’t know what Ōba looks like.”

“If there is a tall and unfamiliar customer requesting to buy this book, he would be the one. Not many people can spend 3.5 million Yen just on one book.”

“But what if a regular customer wants to buy it?”

“Tell the customer that it was already sold through pre-order. A reprint version will not fetch this price.”

“And what if Ōba makes a call to inquire?”

“Then please pretend to not know anything and tell him ‘I placed it in the glass case according to the shopkeeper’s instructions. We do not accept mail orders’. That way, he can only come to the shop.”

I folded my arms once she finished her words. I was not trying to nitpick, but there were risks to this trap, and I just wanted to remove as much uneasiness as I could.

“Then, Shinokawa, can’t you wait till you’re discharged?”

"…Why do you ask?"

"Because he might end up doing something reckless. While he might come to the shop, there is a chance he may come to the hospital and hurt you."

She seemed to be taken aback by this, and her expression was a little stiff.

"I don't think you can run away, right? It would be better to execute this plan once you can walk just like before…right…?"

My voice got softer; Shinokawa's hands were clenched as they rested on her lap. Did I say something weird?

"There is no meaning in waiting… even if we wait on, the situation will not change one bit."

She said hoarsely.

"Eh?"

"I didn't simply get a fracture… my spinal nerves were damaged, and the doctor said that there will be aftereffects after I get discharged. It will take a long while before I can walk like how I used to. Perhaps… I may never get to walk freely for the rest of my life…"

The atmosphere in the ward room immediately froze over.

The rain continued to fall outside.

Osamu Dazai's ''The Late Years'' was placed in the glass case with a tag beside it: '3.5 Million Yen, perfect condition, includes signature'—however, it was a reprint version.

I stood in front of the glass case and reflected over Shinokawa's words. What happened to her legs shocked me as much as the issue regarding Yōzō Ōba.

Perhaps I may never get to walk freely for the rest of my life.

She did not want the police to interfere, and wanted to personally find Ōba, simply because she wanted to settle things personally.

Shinokawa's little sister had returned inside to the house, and I was the only one present in the shop. She did not know anything about Yōzō Ōba, but of course, she knew how severely injured her older sister was.

Speaking of which, when I first came to this shop, she would put me in a choke hold whenever I asked about Shinokawa's injury. This was surprising considering she could rattle on about other things even if I didn't ask, but perhaps this was her way of expressing concern.

Shinokawa said that the issue she was most troubled by was whether she could hide the issue of Ōba from her little sister.

"But my little sister's personality is that she just cannot hide anything… maybe she'll tell someone else, and more importantly, if Ōba appears, she won't be able to handle him calmly."

In other words, I looked more cautious when speaking, and I could be firm when talking with him. I felt I was a little tense, but the information regarding ''The Late Years'' was already uploaded to our shop's homepage. As it stood now, Ōba could appear at the shop anytime soon.

Suddenly, the door opened violently, and I instinctively flinched.

"What's with that scary expression?"

I relaxed my shoulders; the one who appeared was Nao Kosuga. She was the girl who stole the Monument Gleaning + Saint Andersen book from the book watchman Shida the last time, and it seemed, after she returned the book to Shida and apologized to him, her love of reading awoke, and would occasionally come to this shop.

She was dressed in a half-sleeved blouse and a uniform skirt. This was the first time I saw her dressed in school uniform; like Shinokawa's little sister, she was studying at the high school I graduated from.

"I have to go to a friend's house to prepare for the culture festival, but it suddenly started raining… let me stay here for shelter for now, 'kay?"

She entered the shop while talking with a boyish choice of words, and the water droplets dripped down the ends of her short hair. I hurried to the back of the counter; it would be bad if the books were drenched. From the inner house, I took a towel used for wiping, and threw it at the girl standing in front of the glass case.

"Use this."

"Sorry, and thanks."

Nao Kosuga received the towel with a cheerful face, and wiped her hair as she peered into the glass case.

"Oh, is this the rumored book worth 3.5 million Yen?"

"When did it become a rumor?"

I asked in surprise.

“Ah, I already thought of it as a rumor. I saw this on this shop’s website last night… even if it’s not the original edition, the book is still available, right? Will anyone actually buy such an expensive book?”

“…There’ll be people who’d want this.”

One person, at least, though that was an anonymous fanatic stalker.

“Hm…”

She seemed to have lost interest, and turned her back towards the glass case as she looked at me.

“Speaking of which, has Master Shida passed by here recently?”

“I haven’t seen him this week.”

“I think he’ll come by here. It seems he wanted to talk about some book purchase.”

Ever since the book theft incident, Nao Kosuga and Shida had maintained a mysterious relationship. I heard that they would borrow books from each other, and would occasionally share their thoughts at the riverside. Kosuga admired Shida’s knowledge of book-related issues, and started calling him teacher. Having suddenly gained a new student, Shida was reluctant yet delighted somewhat.

“When’s the culture festival?”

I asked. Now that she mentioned it, they usually began preparations once summer break ended.

“Two weeks from now, from Friday to Sunday. If it’s convenient for you to come by…”

She seemed to have remembered something at this moment, and turned her gaze towards the outside of the shop unenthusiastically,

“…Do you still remember that guy called Nishino?”

I frowned. Naturally, there was no way I could forget about him.

“Ahh. What did that guy do?”

That classmate of hers pretended to be very amicable with Nao Kosuga, but actually hated her. I only talked with him once, but I did not have a good impression of him.

“Once summer break ended, the news that that guy rejected me and said so many bad things about me spread around the school. Everyone even knew that guy revealed my phone number and email address to someone else… did you tell anyone from our school regarding what happened last month?”

“No way. I never told anyone.”

Not a lot of people would have known about this; besides the two parties involved, the only ones who would have known were Shinokawa, Shida and I. Nobody could have eavesdropped on our conversation—

“…Ah.”

I looked back at the door leading into the house. Now that she mentioned it, Shinokawa’s little sister was nearby when Shida came to the shop and talked about Nao Kosuga. Shida never mentioned about the book theft, but it seemed he mentioned the name Nishino. My little sister’s personality is that she just cannot hide anything; I recalled Shinokawa stating this about her sister, and it was really troubling.

“Sorry… someone may have heard of it unintentionally.”

“Ah, it’s fine. Don’t worry, I had no intention of hiding it at all.”

She shook her head hard.

“Nishino’s very popular, but it seemed he’s said some really cruel things behind other people’s backs too. The news involving me spread so quickly, and all the girls in our year ignored him… it seems he’s had a hard time getting along with the boys. That guy has been alone practically all this time, and seemed to have left the light music club band…”

I have seen guys, who were very popular in school, have their reputations plummet because of certain incidents; it is scarier when girls gang up together against them. I can only say such a situation is what he deserves.

“I passed by the dejected Nishino in the corridor, and never felt that he deserved it… I feel bad that he became like this because of me. What’s with this feeling?”

“…Since he never said anything, you don’t have to worry too much.”

“Hm…well, that’s true.”

I could understand what ‘this feeling’ was; that kid called Nishino was at this point some random person to her after all. That feeling was the opposite of that empty show of courage when she went to Shida to apologize.

“…Hm?”

Nao Kosuga suddenly narrowed her eyes as she looked outside the window. I too followed her actions and looked over where she was staring at. There was still a downpour outside the window.

“What is it?”

“Someone was at the road just now, looking over here, but he ran off.”

I immediately walked out from the counter, ran down the narrow aisle, and opened the glass sliding door. The large droplets of rain continued to fall upon the pavement, and there was nobody I could spot on the opposite side. Perhaps he made a turn.

“What kind of person was he?”

“Well… he was dressed in a raincoat, and had a hood on… so I couldn’t see his face clearly. It’s most probably a guy though. Did he do anything?”

“…It’s nothing.”

I closed the sliding door silently. There was no need for an ordinary customer to run away.

Perhaps Yōzō Ōba had appeared.

“I waited a little while after that, but that guy never came to the shop.”

It was the second day, and I was in the ‘‘Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia’’. The weather on this day was exceptionally bright, and not many customers came by in the afternoon. Like usual, I was alone in the shop. I was making a call through the telephone at the counter; ‘‘The Late Years’’ replica still remained in the glass case, just as it was the previous day.

“Erm…are you alright?”

I heard Shinokawa’s weak voice from the receiver. She deliberately made her way to the corridor on the wheelchair, and made a call to the shop.

“What about it?”

“…About bringing the book back with you… after the shop closed.”

I see, at this point, I understood.

Last night, after closing the shop, I brought the copy of ‘‘The Late Years’’ to my house in Ōfuna, and stored it in the safe my grandmother used to run her business. If Yōzō Ōba snuck into the shop when the ‘‘Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia’’ was closed, the plan to lure him out with the reprint would fail.

“Don’t worry. Nothing happened.”

I was a little nervous; there was a possibility that I could be attacked during my trips, but I did not find anyone suspicious.

“I am really sorry… for getting you involved in this…”

“You don’t have to mind. I said that I would help you after all.”

“Erm… please do not push yourself too much, Mr. Goura…if anything happens to you, I…”

I subconsciously exerted strength into my hand that was holding the phone receiver. What was after the “I…”? I pricked my ears, wanting to listen carefully, only to hear the sliding door being opened.

“Ah, it seems that there’s a customer here… I’m hanging up for now.”

I immediately hung up. It was really a pity to hang up like this, but I had no time to be bothered by this. Perhaps Yōzō Ōba had appeared. With the receiver in hand, I looked over.

“Hello, Mr. Goura! Ah, are you on the phone? Keep talking, don’t mind us. Just continue on. There’s nothing big from us here!”

The shrill voice pricked at my head, and there appeared a petite woman with a bright one-piece skirt and an aging man wearing sunglasses. Both of them entered the shop, their arms locked together.

“It has been a while. Sorry to trouble you the last time.”

The man—Masashi Sakaguchi spoke. They were the Sakaguchi couple; previously, the husband wanted to sell his copy of Vinogradov/Kuzmin’s Introduction to Logic, and his wife came over to take it back. Their ages and personalities were different, but they were both able to get along well.

“Welcome. Is there anything you need?”

I asked.

I could see that Masashi Sakaguchi was not wearing a business suit, but a different attire; he did not have a tie, and he was dressed in a jacket and pants that had lots of creases on it.

“I just retired from my company a few days ago, so…”

“We’re going to request for passports! That’s because we never had a honeymoon trip before…”

"…We intend to go to Europe for a week."

"We thought we should drop by and greet you before we leave! We just visited the shop owner at the hospital before coming over here!"

"I-is that so…then, thanks…"

My mind was a little confused by the explanations that came from completely different voices and tones. Suddenly, Shinobu Sakaguchi spoke seriously.

"We want to see all sorts of things together now that we have the chance…before Masa's eye illness worsens. The doctor said…"

"Shinobu."

Sakaguchi's clear voice rang, overpowering his wife's voice.

"Don't call me Masa. Even when we're travelling."

"Ah, my bad."

Ufufu. Shinobu chuckled as she covered her mouth. It did not seem that Sakaguchi was completely unwilling to be called this, and rather than them, I felt a little awkward as I looked at them. Their arms were locked together since they came in, and they did not seem like they'd break away anytime soon.

"I really want to thank you and Miss Shinokawa."

Sakaguchi stared at my face from behind his sunglasses. The color of the lens were darker compared to when we last met.

"If I had not met you two, I would not have been able to reveal my secret."

"Ah, that's not it…"

I was a little embarrassed to receive such thanks directly. Also, though they said 'we', they should be thanking Shinokawa only, rather than both of us. She completely understood the reason why everything happened back then, just from a single copy of the Introduction to Logic and a little excerpt of conversation she chanced upon. I was just standing beside her, looking amazed.

"Well then, I guess it's time for us to leave."

After talking for a little while, the Sakaguchi couple passed through the glass door. I found that the wife was walking a little faster, and I noticed that their arms were not intertwined together simply because they had a good relationship with each other. Shinobu Sakaguchi was dragging Masashi Sakaguchi, whose eyesight had weakened as compared to before.

"…Please come by when you have the time."

I called out while facing their backs. Both of them returned me a smile and walked out of the glass door. Just when I was about to continue my work,

"Hey, what are you doing squatting down there? Are you alright?"

Shinobu Sakaguchi's voice rang as she stood outside the glass door and asked someone else. There was still another person outside.

I hurried out of the shop—and then, the male dressed in a raincoat turned away from me and dashed away. Looking at his strides, it seemed he was relatively young, but as he did not have his hood on, I could only figure out his hairstyle. His hair was short, not dyed, and did not seem to have any unique traits.

"Hey! Wait!"

I yelled, but he did not stop, and immediately disappeared around the corner. The shop was still open, so I could not chase after him. I again turned towards the Sakaguchi couple.

"Did you see that man's face just now?"

For an instant, both of them turned to look at each other.

"…No, he was crouched at the sign, and his back was facing us."

Shinobu Sakaguchi pointed at the rotating signboard.

What was he doing down there? I spun the sign over, and found some liquid with some strange odor splashed over it. It seemed to be some volatile drug or—

(Gasoline.)

My face immediately turned pale. The sign was soaked in gasoline, and on a closer look, there was a small item dropped near the scale. It was definitely something the escaped man brought along.

It was a one-time use lighter.

"…I think it's better to explain to the police what happened up until now regarding Yōzō Ōba."

I spoke into the receiver to Shinokawa, the same person who I had been talking to before this. I sent her an email, and requested for her to make a call back to me.

“It would be too late if the shop was burned down.”

It was an hour after the Sakaguchi couple left. I shuddered to think what would have happened if those two were not around. This shop might have become ash now.

“Hm… that might be a good idea… since this happened…”

Shinokawa murmured as she pondered.

“However… there is something I am concerned about.”

“What is it?”

“Did Yōzō Ōba really do this?”

“Eh?”

I exclaimed into the phone.

“What do you mean?”

“Ōba probably thinks that the book is in the shop, so why would he do something that would endanger the book he wants to get?”

At that instance, I did not know how to answer.

“…Maybe he planned to start a commotion first, and then use that chance to steal it.”

“If he wants to instigate an incident, there are many ways to do this without putting the book in harm’s way… like creating a ruckus outside the shop or something.”

“But nobody other than him would have done such a thing, right?”

I did not really understand why Shinokawa was feeling confused. I thought she was simply talking about some trivial details.

“That is true… may I leave it to you to contact the police?”

“Yes, got…”

Just when I was about to answer, I suddenly whiffed upon an intense stench. Something seemed to be burning. I lifted my head, and there was black smoke covering the outside of the glass window.

“Damn it!”

I threw the receiver down in a hurry and grabbed the fire extinguisher I prepared beforehand. The white powder let out a sound as it spurt out from the tip of the tube, covering the smoke that scattered everywhere.

Perhaps it was because the fire extinguisher was so old that the flames were not doused. The powder started to weaken in momentum before the flames could be stifled, and just when the flames were about to overcome it—no good, the instant I thought this, the flames were finally extinguished, and the smoke was the only thing left.

I heaved a sigh of relief and looked over. My vision was blurred as there was ostensibly a fog floating around, but I managed to find a man dressed in a raincoat, standing at a telephone pole ten steps away. He was probably the one I just saw.

“…Ōba?”

The moment the man heard me, he immediately ran off while looking like he was going to knock the telephone pole aside. There was no doubt he was the culprit, the man who caused Shinokawa to be severely injured, and who wanted to burn the shop down. I definitely could not lose this chance, and dumped the fire extinguisher aside as I gave chase.

I thought I would be able to catch up immediately, as I was still confident in my leg strength—however, he was faster than I was, and the distance increased slowly. He was right in front of me, but perhaps I could not catch him.

“Damn it…”

Just when I was gritting my teeth, two bicycles suddenly appeared on the fork. One of them was a commuter’s bicycle with a large and broken basket, while the other was a high-speed cross country bicycle. The ones riding on them were a bald man and a pretty model-like man respectively—the book watchmen Shida and Kasai. The escaping man crashed into Shida’s bicycle.

Shida called out. The man suddenly stopped to avoid those two, and at that instant, I caught up and grabbed his raincoat by the collar tightly.

“Let go of me!”

The man turned around, wanting to remove my fingers, but I do have a ranking in judo. I grabbed him by his wrist, and did a suplex, slamming his back on the asphalt road. I then immediately held him down, and restrained his movements above the shoulders.

“Behave yourself! Ōba!”

I exerted strength in my wrists as I yelled at him. I peered at his face from close up, and he was a lot younger than what I imagined him to be. I could say he was in his teens, and there was still some innocence left on his face. This may be the first time we met—no, on a closer look, it seemed like we met somewhere before.

“WHO THE HECK IS ŌBA! YOU’RE USING TOO MUCH STRENGTH, YOU BASTARD!”

The boy groaned in pain, and I inadvertently widened my eyes. His hair was dyed back to black, and at this point, I then realized that the one I was restraining was Nao Kosuga’s classmate—the boy called Nishino.

The events were handled smoothly after that.

The police hurried onto the scene, whisked Nishino away, and did investigations in front of the shop. There was no damage other than the burn marks on the signboard and the fire extinguisher powder dirtying the road.

I did not ask Nishino why he did this, as he ranted a lot to us before the police arrived. Leaving aside the insults and slander towards me, his rant could be simplified to a single line.

“…To summarize things, he has a grudge against you.”

Kasai looked surprised after the police left. Shida, Kasai and I were surrounding the counter in the ‘‘Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia’’. They just so happened to arrive at the shop to discuss books with me, and accompanied me as we waited for the police to leave—they even watched over the shop while I was explaining the situation to the police.

“It seems to be the case.”

I too sighed.

What happened to Nishino was—he was isolated by the other students at school, because someone checked on his private matters and scattered rumors behind his back. Of course, he suspected Nao Kosuga, and there must have been other ‘culprits’.

As he was tailing Nao Kosuga, he arrived at this shop—and nothing happened. The suspicious person Nao Kosuga spotted the previous day, and the one peeping into the shop was Nishino.

Upon seeing Nao Kosuga talk with me in a rather earnest manner, Nishino realized that I was the man who spoke with him during summer break, and finally ‘realized’. He knew that I was the only man who knew that he revealed Nao Kosuga’s personal information, and deemed that this man was the culprit. He said he did not intend to burn the shop down, but he just wanted to take revenge on me.

“Didn’t you notice from the beginning? You’ve met before, didn’t you?”

Shida asked me.

“He was blond the last time I spoke to him.”

It seemed he only bleached his hair during summer break. The school rules forbid students from bleaching their hair, and he dyed it black before September.

“Anyway, it’s a good thing you caught him. There might be no stop to his rampage if you let him go like that.”

Shida vented away; he was in a foul mood for a while as Nishino had stated his plan after setting fire to the shop. It seemed he wanted to do the same thing to Nao Kosuga’s house, and if that happened, the fire might not be put out as successfully this time.

“Anyway, isn’t this matter settled now? He’s taken away by the police now.”

Kasai advised with a smile, and Shida nodded in agreement.

“…That’s true.”

I too wanted to smile along with them, but this did not mean all the shop’s issues were solved. I was back at square one regarding the matter about Yōzō Ōba, and he had not done anything for these two days. The ones who came to this shop were familiar people like Shida.

I sent an email to Shinokawa, telling her about Nishino’s arson attempt. Due to the change in situation, I did not tell the police about Ōba. I intended to make a trip to the hospital later and discuss future plans with her.

"Oh? Isn't this the First Edition of ‘‘The Late Years’’? You managed to get such a book too?"

Shida exclaimed as he stood in front of the glass case.

"Well… this actually belongs to the shop…"

I stammered. Kasai might not be familiar with books, but I did not want to show this to Shida, who has a kee

"Have a look at it too, 'baron'. It's not often you get to see an uncut First Edition book."

"Heh? Is it really that valuable?"

Kasai too approached the glass case.

"What kind of joke is that? Isn't that to be expected… hey, isn't this just a replica?"

An agitated voice rang through the shop. Were we found out? I clicked my tongue in secret; there was no way we could have fooled Shida after all.

"Ah, you knew after all?"

“Of course! The pages are too fresh! Why must you sell such a thing? There’s no need to sell a reprint version at such a price, right?”

“Well… about that… we didn’t show the real thing for safety’s sake, so we left the replica over there…”

I gave a vague explanation, but Shida showed an obvious look of disagreement.

“This is really a weird practice for this shop however… anyone can tell this is a fake immediately. At least dirty the cover a little.”

“It looks just like the real thing to me though.”

Kasai stood at the glass case, his hands on his hip, his head tilted forward.

“Where is the real item being kept?”

“With Shinokawa at the hospital.”

“So it’s left in the ward room? That’s too careless.”

The frowns on Shida’s face increased.

“There’s a safe in the ward room though.”

“…I’d say.”

Shida leaned his body towards the counter, and my eyes inadvertently avoided his gaze.

“It’s very unnatural for an antiquarian bookshop to deliberately show a duplicate. I don’t think that lady shop owner would deliberately attempt to fool a customer… is there something going on?”

“No, it-it’s nothing…”

Shida ignored my reply and continued,

“If it’s something I can do too, I’ll definitely chip in. You guys did help me out before.”

“I’ll help too, though I don’t really understand about books.”

Kasai answered cheerily.

I pondered for a moment. Isn’t it great to reveal everything to these two and get their help? No, shall I discuss this with Shinokawa first? She doesn’t want to include any third parties other than me here. In this end, this is simply her private matter.

“…Please let me think through this for a moment.”

I answered both of them. At this moment, a slight vibrating sound could be heard from a cellphone.

“Ah, sorry. I think it’s a customer.”

Kasai’s phone rang. He lowered his head, passed through the sliding door, went outside, and started dialing. I could clearly hear him clearly state the price of a game console; it seemed there was a customer who wanted to buy one.

Shida and I inadvertently stared at Kasai’s back. The latter was about the same height as me,, was taller than the door frame, and I could only see the body below his ears.

“…That ‘baron’ seems a little weird today.”

Shida nonchalantly said.

“Really?”

“Because he pretended not to know about the First Edition of ‘‘The Late Years’’; how could he not know about this?”

“Isn’t it because he’s not too clear about books? He did say this before.”

He did say before that he was unfamiliar with books, as he mostly traded in games and CDs.

“I’d say, you, that’s just him being humble. Can’t you tell from his name? He’s the ‘baron’, you know?”

I did not understand at all. Was the nickname ‘baron’ not something Shida gave Kasai based on his appearance? Just when I was perplexed, Shida sighed, ostensibly amazed by me.

“In this industry, when mentioning ‘book watchman’ and Kasai, anyone who likes books would have realized… but never mind, I can’t blame you even if you don’t know.”

“What’s going on?”

“How can Kasai be a real name? It’s just a name he gave himself just to make himself cool.”

Suddenly, I felt a chill up my spine.

“You’ve seen that guy’s namecard before, I suppose? Kikuya Kasai. That is the name of the protagonist in Toshiyuki Kajiyama’s The Many Exploits of the Book Watchman Baron. It’s a novel with a Book Watchman as a protagonist, just as its title implies. That’s why I call him ‘baron’.”

I never thought that this would be the source of the nickname. No, there was something I was more concerned by; someone actually introduced himself as the protagonist of a novel—I just heard of this recently.

Yōzō Ōba—the name of the protagonist in the short story of ‘‘The Late Years’’ anthology.

I hurriedly shook off the thought in my mind. N-no way, how can that be possible?

“Have you known Mr. Kasai for a long time?”

“No, not too long.”

Shida shook his head.

“Didn’t I tell you he was someone I knew recently when I came by in the summer? We haven’t known each other for 2 months yet.”

It was 2 months ago when Shinokawa was injured. Suddenly, I felt there was a stranger as I stared at Kasai’s back. I did not want to make a random guess, but Kasai was a lot taller than an ordinary person.

Shinokawa too said that Yōzō Ōba was rather tall.

“…Does he live around here?”

I did not look away from Kasai as I asked.

“That’s the case… but it seems his situation is a little complicated. He was originally born in a wealthy family in Hase, and it seems his ancestors were buried there. But soon after, they accumulated quite a large sum of debt, and by his parents’ generation, they had to sell their house and leave Kamakura. He then lived for a little while in Tokyo, and due to work reasons, he returned back to Kamkura.”

My ears reacted upon hearing the place called Hase; that was the place where the Museum displayed Shinokawa’s ‘‘The Late Years’’. If his ancestors’ graves were all there, he would have paid a visit there. It would not be strange of him to visit the nearby tourist attractions while he was around.

I felt it was a little suspicious when I heard about Yōzō Ōba from Shinokawa, as Ōba did not make any contact with Shinokawa these two months—he may have threatened Shinokawa into handing over ‘‘The Late Years’’, but there was no way he could get the book without any action. Then, what was he doing all this while?

Maybe he had been doing necessary things. First, he built a relationship with Shida, who knew Shinokawa, and kept an eye on the movements in this shop. After then, he became acquaintances with me, the employee. Of course, this would be if he did all these to find out where ‘‘The Late Years’’ is, and to get the book.

Of course, this was simply my imagination. I did not have any proof, and I did not have any interrogative skills.

I could only probe.

I walked away from the counter and cautiously approached Kasai. He was thanking the other party, ended his call, and just as he was about to slip his phone into his pocket, I pretended to talk to him normally. People will relax right when the call ends.

“Ah, Ōba, well.”

I asked, and Kasai tilted his head and turned to me. Unfortunately, he was not a careless person, and did not answer ‘yes’ instinctively, but pointed at himself and said with a natural smile.

“I’m Kasai.”

He answered with a clear voice, and my body froze in place. So it’s him after all, all my doubts became conviction; I shook my head slowly,

“No, you’re not Kasai. You’re Yōzō Ōba, but that’s not your real name either.”

“What are you saying? I don’t understand at all. What’s the matter?”

He probably noticed he was being probed, and seemed to intend on insisting that he isn’t Kasai—unfortunately, this attempt to throw me off would not work.

“Why do you think I was calling you?”

I pointed at the road; there was a housewife passing by, going to do her shopping. Normally, when an unfamiliar name was called, anyone would think someone else is called. If he had not heard of this name, he would not have made such an immediate response.

The silence continued, and the man in front of me narrowed his eyes slightly.

"…How unexpected, I didn't think you were a famous detective like that woman either."

Kikuya Kasai—Yōzō Ōba said with a mocking tone, and I glared at him wordlessly. This man injured her badly; I told myself, this is someone who may do something unexpected. Just when I got ready to capture him,

"Can't be helped."

Kasai muttered, and ran out. He got on the bicycle parked beside the shop, and immediately escaped at breakneck speed. I watched his large back disappear into the evening dusk. I was dumbstruck by his quick getaway, but a chill immediately struck my entire body.

"Please help me watch the shop!"

I called out to Shida, who widened his eyes, took out my cellphone, and ran to the motor scooter parked in front of the shop. Since his identity was revealed, Ōba's next step would be obvious. He probably wants to get ''The Late Years'' no matter the means.

I answered him carelessly when he asked me.

The real copy of ''The Late Years'' First Edition was with Shinokawa at the hospital.

Ōba was headed for the hospital; I had to hurry up and tell her that danger imminent. My fingers shuddered slightly as I pressed the keys of the cellphone, and once I sent the message, I immediately rushed to the hospital.

As I was dashing to the hospital on the scooter, the cellphone in my pocket shook. I pulled it out while trying my best not to reduce speed, lowered my head and glanced at the cellphone screen. It was a message from Shinokawa, and it was a very short reply,

"I am running to the roof. Please help me buy some time."

I closed the cellphone and started to ponder over the content. Was she escaping to the roof as it was dangerous for her to be in the ward room? I could understand that, but what about 'buy some time'?

I took the shortest path, and got to Ōfuna General Hospital in around 5 minutes. I parked my scooter near the main entrance, and found a familiar bicycle lying sideways on the flower bed.

I immediately stopped in my tracks. That was Ōba's bicycle; though I gave full chase, he managed to get there one step ahead of me. That man had arrived at this hospital.

I was about to run to the automatic sliding door, but a piece of cloth floated in front of me. It was a purple fukusa; just when I was about to wave it aside, I found this a little familiar. It was the fukusa used to wrap ''The Late Years''.

I lifted my head and stared at the building. All the windows of the ward rooms were tightly shut, so this fukusa must have dropped from the roof. I did not know if it was thrown down deliberately, but I knew that Shinokawa must have been at the rooftop. It would be best if Ōba did not find her.

With a prayerful heart, I dashed through the corridor and ran to the elevator. I passed by the clinic registration room, and found that there was practically no one to be seen on the lobby. The two elevators lined beside each other were headed to other levels.

I clicked my tongue and ran up the stairs. My footsteps sounded exceptionally loud. In my heart, I deeply regretted that I let Ōba escape successfully at the shop entrance. If only I had noticed it earlier—I ran up the many platforms on the flights of stairs, and kicked down the door at the end viciously.

The concrete roof surrounded by a white parapet was very spacious. At this moment, nightfall had arrived, and it seemed nobody would have deliberately made their way here. There were only two profiles under the roof shade.

I saw the two people staring at each other, and my limbs were a little limp. One of them was Shinokawa, seated on the wheelchair, hugging ''The Late Years'' tightly in front of her chest. The other was the tall and lanky handsome man—Yōzō Ōba, standing a few steps away from her. He found her.

"Ōba!"

I was about to charge right between them, but at that moment, I froze and stopped. Ōba was holding a large pair of scissors in his hands; it was the item he said he brought along whenever he went, and the long sharp blades were pointed at Shinokawa's face. She gave me a glance with her pale face—don't move, it seemed this was what she wanted to tell me.

"Yes, it's better for him not to move."

Ōba exclaimed with a loud voice,

"I won't damage the book, but I'll show no mercy for people."

He spoke with the 'Kasai' tone that sounded pretentious and yet affectionate. My mind was a little confused; upon seeing him, I really could not believe the one talking in front of me was really the one who pushed Shinokawa.

"…Even if you get the book, you won't be able to escape from here."

I tried my best not to agitate him, and spoke quietly.

“I don’t think so.”

Ōba snickered.

“You don’t even know my real name. Once I leave this land, even the police will have difficulty tracking me. After I change this face, I can start again somewhere else. I can also go overseas and hide for a while.”

He rattled on about his plan, and the scale of this plan astounded me. Now that I think about it, since he pushed Shinokawa and moved away from Kamakara, it was not be surprising to think he would approach this shop with another false name.

“…Is there a need for you to go to this extent just for a mere book?”

I nonchalantly said. Suddenly, Ōba showed a belittling expression, and glanced at me coldly as if he were staring at living trash.

“Someone like you would not understand, even if this book is right in front of you.”

The tip of the scissors in Ōba’s hand were pointed at Shinokawa’s ‘‘The Late Years’’.

“There are only a few copies of this version, and it’s practically a miracle for this to be preserved in such an intact state after being passed down. I’m a little surprised that you don’t understand this. This book not only contains the contents; the experiences this book went through is also a story too… I want to get that story as well.”

I faintly felt a sense of familiarity—Ōba's words felt similar to Shinokawa’s words. No, that was just my thought.

“Even if you have to snatch it from someone else’s hands?”

“There’s nothing bad about that. This book also has this line ‘To all living things, live on with confidence. We are all to become sinners’ … this line is a blessing to people like me. As for me, nothing matters as long as I have books. I CAN GIVE UP MY FAMILY, FRIENDS, INHERITANCE, OR EVEN MY NAME; THIS IS MY TRUE IDEAL. NO MATTER HOW MUCH OF A SACRIFICE I NEED TO MAKE, OR HOW MANY YEARS, I MUST HAVE THAT BOOK!”

Ōba yelled with bloodshot eyes, and I shuddered. I thought everything would be solved once I caught this man, but he was obviously not someone that easy to deal with. Even if he were arrested and convicted, he might try to steal ‘‘The Late Years’’ again. Shinokawa and I will be pursued by him for the rest of our lives.

“This woman too is the same as me. She’s gives the same presence as me… we’ll feel happy as long as we’re surrounded by books.”

“Don’t you dare associate her with you, you bastard. You two are completely different.”

I recalled the ward room filled with old books as I said that. It was true she liked books, but there was a decisive difference between her and this man; I was certain that she definitely would not hurt or deceive anyone else.

“It’s about time to end our conversation now. How about you try to advise her to give me the book.”

I suddenly noticed that Ōba did not try to snatch ‘‘The Late Years’’ from Shinokawa, as he was afraid of dirtying the book. It was because he clearly knew that Shinokawa was clinging onto this valuable book.

“…I don’t have that much time.”

Ōba slowly brought the scissors to her face. Though he was being cautious, he could do anything if Shinokawa did not hand the book over. In that case, Shinokawa would be in danger, since she could not walk, let alone protect herself.

I made the decision to charge over during this time. My first priority would be to protect Shinokawa, followed by ‘‘The Late Years’’. There was still some distance, but as long as I could grab a certain part of his body, I believe that I can suppress him even if he resist with all his might. I glided my feet slowly towards him and lowered my center of gravity slightly.

“Mr. Yōzō Ōba, I am different from you.”

At this moment, Shinokawa, who had remained silent all this while, suddenly spoke, and I inadvertently stopped what I was doing. She stared at Ōba with strong will in her eyes, and did not seem to have noticed the scissors tips. In the face of such a drastic change, Ōba too was taken aback.

“I had been thinking… to me, there are more important things than old books. Thus, I need to end things here.”

She kicked the floor with her left leg that was free. The wheelchair slid backwards smoothly, crashed into the parapet 1m away, and stopped. The distance between her and Ōba increased slightly, and just when the latter was about to approach her…

“Do not come near!”

Shinokawa raised ‘‘The Late Years’’ like a shield. The texture of the paper obviously looked aged, and was different from the paper texture of the reprint edition in the shop. As the roof was slowly covered by the shroud of night above, she flipped aside the cover to reveal the inside. I could vaguely see the words written by Osamu Dazai—‘To all living things, live on with confidence. We are all to become sinners’.

“Perhaps Dazai wanted to encourage someone as he gave this book away. I do not know what happened when it reached my grandfather’s hands, but I was severely injured because of it. You will be arrested by the police… after 70 years, this book is living in a different era from Dazai’s time, and it’s become a book nobody can gain happiness from.”

She reached her hand into her pajamas pocket, and took out something.

“This book is the culprit behind everything, so—”

A clear stern voice rang in the darkness, causing me to shudder. I could clearly see what she was holding from between her fingers, and inadvertently cried out. That was a one-time-use lighter.

“Let us end everything here.”

“S-STOP IIIITTT!”

The moment Ōba hollered, the lighter burned the book. At that moment, the flames spread on the paraffin paper wrapped on the cover. She threw ‘‘The Late Years’’ over the parapet without hesitation.

Ōba wailed as if his body was being burned, and tried to climb over the parapet as he chased after ‘‘The Late Years’’ that was thrown away. I too hurried over, and managed to grab Ōba by his belt at the last moment, when he was about to leap over.

“IDIOT! WHAT ARE YOU DOING!?”

This hospital is 6 levels high, and certain death awaited those who jumped down. Even so, Ōba continued to holler and struggle.

‘‘The Late Years’’ dropped onto the roof of the entrance, and burned away as it smoked. It no longer existed in the form of a book.

The moment Ōba relaxed, I suplexed him onto the concrete floor, held down his wrist joints and exerted pressure on them. Our physiques were similar, but I managed to pin him down successfully. It seemed he never trained in any martial arts.

There were footsteps coming from the stairs. Someone must have noticed the commotion here; there would be people here soon. Ōba continued to struggle under me, and his groaning voice sounded like sobbing.

I heaved a sigh of relief and looked over at Shinokawa. She seemed to have lost her strength as she collapsed back onto the wheelchair—I suddenly recalled the contents of the email she sent me. It seemed this was what she was referring to when she said, ‘help me buy some time’. She intended to burn ‘‘The Late Years’’ once she knew Ōba would come to the hospital.

“…Is it really alright?”

I could not help but ask. I really could not believe she would do such a thing when she viewed books to be as important as her life. After thinking again, she concluded,

“Right…I had no choice to do this.”

The book worth several million yen became ash and floated to the sky. As she watched it silently, I was surprised by how composed she was; it felt like she did not lose anything at all.

Ōba would not be able to threaten her anymore. Everything was over.

“…Ah?”

Shinokawa reached her hand out and picked up something. It was a leather business card holder for men, but it was not my stuff, so it was probably something Ōba dropped. Several cards dropped out from the card holder that was folded. She took one of them, and upon looking at it, her expression changed drastically.

“Mr. Goura… this is…”

She spoke with a hoarse voice as she handed the card to me. I tried to bring my face as close as possible in the midst of this dim night. It was a driver’s license, and though the photo was Ōba’s, the name was different.

“Toshio Tanaka.”

So this was his real name! It was not Kikuya Kasai nor Yōzō Ōba. Well, it certain was a plain name, and perhaps he used a false name because of this.

“Eh?”

I was startled. A month ago, I had come across a similar name. I lowered my head and looked at this man I suppressed. He was as tall as me. I remembered Shinokawa saying that Yōzō Ōba had a similar voice to mine.

Shida said that he was born in Hase of Kamakura, and his ancestors’ graves were there. If that was true, naturally, the conclusion was that this man’s grandfather used to live in Kamakura.

“…Just to ask, is your grandfather named Yoshio Tanaka?”

I asked softly. This man called Yoshio Tanaka could be my grandmother’s lover—and this may be a man related to me by blood. Tanaka curled his lips and looked up at me.

“Yoshio Tanaka is my grandfather…how did you know?”

“…”

"The Tanakas ran a trading firm since the Meiji era. I heard the family business was bustling before grandfather inherited. I am the only Tanaka left…just look at me now.”

Toshio Tanaka remarked wryly with a self-deprecating tone. His moustache was long, but there was a wild charm left behind. I thought it was a good thing to be a handsome man.

“Grandfather was the one who gave me this name. It’s a bad name, right? He simply changed his name a little.”

We were looking at each other through the transparent panel. 5 days after Tanaka was arrested, I went to visit him at the detention center.

According to the police, investigations were proceeding smoothly. He clearly pleaded guilty to pushing down Shinokawa and breaking into the Shinokawas’ house; after committing many crimes that include distress, unsuccessful theft, and intimidation, there was no doubt that he had to serve jail time.

They investigated Toshio Tanaka’s past, and found all sorts of problems—in the past, he worked at an Antiquarian Bookshop for a while, stole some products and added them to part of his collection. After he was fired, he started an auction business on the internet, and started some scams that got him in trouble. It seemed there were a lot of criminal counts against him.

“Your grandfather…well, has he died?”

After hesitating for a while, I asked. One of the reasons why I started work at the ‘‘Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia’’ was because I wanted to hear news regarding Yoshio Tanaka.

“…It seems you just want to ask about Grandfather.”

“Ah, actually, my grandparents were on good terms with him. He seemed to have visited my house before… so I often hear his name.”

“So that’s how it is.”

Tanaka did not give a suspicious look even after hearing my words, and nodded,

“Grandfather died 15 years ago. That was a little while after he sold our house in Kamakura and moved our entire family to Tokyo.”

“…I see.”

In other words, nobody knew of the relationship my grandmother had with this Yoshio Tanaka. It was a little of a pity that he died without anyone knowing the details, but I was a little relieved to know that grandmother’s secret would not be revealed.

“What kind of person was your grandfather?”

“He was very tall, and if you compare the photos, I look very similar to grandfather when he was young. He was a nice person, often took care of others, and had a relatively wide array of relationships. He also has contact with movie stars and producers; I heard he often ate and drank with them… wasn’t there a filming studio in Ofuna?”

I nodded as I hid my expression. I already understood what sort of relationship my grandmother had with him.

“However, the company business didn't go well, and everyone left. By the time I took over, our house was the only asset left. My parents worked hard, trying to earn back a little of our inheritance, so I was left under grandfather’s care… the two of us practically lived together. Grandfather passionately took care of me and often talked about old books with me. When he was young, he was a collector of old books, and he was the one who taught me the basic knowledge regarding them… however, our shop did not have a single old book left at that time. He had sold them all. It was that time when I started loving old books; I just kept listening to him, but I could not read at all. I was a kid who wanted to read, but could not…”

As I continued to listen, I had an inexplicable feeling rising within me. His childhood experience was somewhat similar to mine, and I inadvertently felt a sense of familiarity with him.

“Let me tell you something good… I never said this to anyone else before.”

Tanaka enthusiastically leaned over and placed his hands on the transparent panel. The police officer watching over us in the meeting room frowned, but did not say anything in the end.

“It’s likely that ‘‘The Late Years’’ originally belongs to my grandfather.”

“Eh?”

I widened my eyes. It seemed my response delighted Tanaka, and he continued on.

“Grandfather often lamented… that because of financial difficulties, he sold the uncut copy of ‘‘The Late Years’’ with the signature inside it, and seemed to have sold it cheaply. It seemed he really regretted over it.”

At this point, I finally understood why Tanaka was so obsessed with ‘‘The Late Years’’. I guess he wanted to commemorate his grandfather through that book. I recalled the words Shinokawa said, I feel that old books that are handed down have their own stories as well, and not simply the contents of the stories within.

However, there was not a single trace of this book left.

(…Hm?)

I felt something was amiss inside my heart. I had this same feeling on the hospital roof 5 days ago.

“Speaking about which, what about that woman? Is she still leisurely reading books in the hospital?”

Tanaka suddenly said with a scathing tone, ostensibly venting his frustrations. It seemed he was still furious at Shinokawa for burning ‘‘The Late Years’’, and at this point, I inadvertently glared back at him.

"…She's still in the hospital. Isn't that because of you?"

This man had no right to tell off Shinokawa. Tanaka clicked his tongue, probably unable to rebut, and looked aside.

"I thought she would not let go of the book if I did not do this… because she seemed to be someone like me. But I was mistaken; that woman doesn't really like old books. Anyone who likes old books would definitely not do such a thing.

"Why can you be so certain?"

She was someone who definitely loved books, no matter whose opinion it was. I understood such people, as my family had a 'bookworm' too.

But Toshio Tanaka seemed to have his own opinion.

"I can say this firmly. As far as I know, a collector would definitely never burn a book. He would keep the book with him no matter the means."

You still want to argue? I was about to argue back, but I could not say anything.

He would keep the book with him no matter the means.

The lingering erroneous sense in my head, which remained unsolved, suddenly linked together.

On that moment, 5 days ago—no, I felt something was amiss before that, when 'Yōzō Ōba' came to the shop, when she explained about ''The Late Years''.

I unconsciously kicked the chair away and stood up.

So that's how it is? There's no other explanation.

"What is it? You don't look good."

Tanaka stared at my face suspiciously, and I shook my head slowly. There was no way I could let this man realize the truth.

"…I should head back now."

I wanted to say that I would be back, but I resisted the urge. As long as the link between our bloodlines was not revealed, there was nothing I could say to this man, and there was no need for me to meet him in the future. Just when I called out to the police officer indicating that I wanted to leave the meeting room.

"I had been thinking ever since I first met you last month."

Tanaka's voice came from behind.

"Did you meet me in the past somewhere? I seem to be able to talk a lot when I'm with you… it seems like we once interacted with each other somewhere."

At that instant, I did not know how to answer. There was interaction, but it was not us, but during our grandparents' era.

"No, we're unacquainted strangers who never knew each other before."

I knocked on the ward room door, but there was no reply. I then opened the door and entered.

Shioriko was lying on the mattress of the reclining machine bed that was slightly lowered, her eyes closed. It was a scene similar to the one when I first arrived.

The gentle sunlight finally had some presence of autumn as it lit the entire room. Her silky face and hairs on her wrists were glittering white. With the thought that she was a pretty person after all, I pulled the chair to her and sat down.

The legs of the chair rubbed against the floor, letting out a screeching noise. I was tired from thinking over everything, and was not in the state of mind to pull the chair quietly. The thin eyelids behind the glasses then opened slowly.

Shinokawa's detected my existence right beside her, and hurriedly lowered her head in ostensible embarrassment. She adjusted her glasses, and hid her blushing face.

"Eh, erm…sorry…I-I…didn't hear that you were coming today…so…"

"Sorry for coming over so suddenly."

Her stare wavered nervously. This however, was rather unrestrained compared to how it was a month ago, and I could understand her easily no matter what she said. I could see she was troubled.

As I thought about what I had to say next, my heart felt a little heavy.

"I went to meet Toshio Tanaka today."

Her black irises twitched, and she glanced at my face. Her mind was probably thinking about all kinds of things at this moment,

"…I see."

But she merely said this. As she never asked 'what did you two talk about', I had no choice but to continue.

"He said you were lying when you said that you liked books, Shinokawa."

"…Why is that so?"

"Because you burned ''The Late Years''."

"…What did you say regarding that issue…Mr. Goura?"

"I asked him why he was able to say that so confidently."

"…That…erm…what exactly is that topic you talked about?"

"We talked about whether you like books, Shinokawa. Is there anything else?"

"…"

She suddenly went silent. My expression and voice were terse, and I felt I was clearly showing the reason why I came here. She too probably realized it, but had no intention of revealing it to me.

"Shinokawa, do you like books?"

"…I would like to assume so."

This answer was practically the same as telling me the truth at this point.

I pointed at the safe at the bottom of the rack.

"Can I check what's inside the safe again?"

She did not say anything, undid the button of her pajamas, and reached her hand towards her chest. Her skin that was not tanned by the daylight looked pale, and she took out a little key from the front of her chest. I received the key, and used it to open the safe.

There was something wrapped with purple fukusa placed inside. Unfortunately, it was just as I thought.

I returned to the chair, laid the package on my lap and opened it. A book appeared from within the fukusa, and the whitened cover had a handwritten title on it. The two sides of the pages remained uncut; it was left uncut. Of course, there was the wrapper.

I cautiously opened the cover, and found the small handwriting over it—"To all living things, live on with confidence. We are all to become sinners."

The copy on my lap was the First Edition of Osamu Dazai's ''The Late Years'' that was supposedly burned.

"I guess this one here is the real ''The Late Years''."

I said. it was not a question, but simply a confirmation.

"The burned book that time was a fake."

"…How did you know?"

Shinokawa asked with a feeble voice.

"At first, I felt something inexplicable. Why…"

Just when I was about to start explaining, I grimaced. Such an introduction did not suit me at all; she had always been the one revealing the truth, and I would be the one listening—but our positions have switched around. Besides, I was the one who solved this mystery.

"Why wouldn't you make a police report, or if you didn't do this, couldn't you have asked someone else for help…? Even considering all the various reasons you had, Shinokawa it was weird that you and I ended up looking for 'Yōzō Ōba' by ourselves."

"…"

"But the decisive moment was what happened 5 days ago. After thinking about that… I already gave you a warning through email, but why didn't you ask the hospital staff for help?"

And this person deliberately escaped to the roof, where no one else was present. If she had escaped to somewhere else with people around, that man would not have been able to threaten her.

"I was thinking if you did all of that deliberately, Shinokawa, you needed to run to a place nobody else would be at, and have a showdown against 'Yōzō Ōba'… there was only one reason for this. You wanted to show him the scene of ''The Late Years'' being burned. You wanted to make sure that man doesn't appear in front of you again with the memory etched deeply in him, to make him think that the book he wants doesn't exist anymore… right?"

I stopped and waited for her reply, but a heavy silence drifted in this place. There was not even a single excuse or explanation, and that really infuriated me.

“But it would have been suspicious if you simply called him over and burned the book. That’s why you made that man find out where ‘‘The Late Years’’ is, made him come to the hospital to snatch it… Shida said back then, ‘Kikuya Kasai isn’t a real name’, ‘anyone who loves books in this market would have noticed this’. You already noticed it too, right? Of course, you knew that ‘Kikuya Kasai’ and ‘Youzou Ooba’ were the same person, so you made use of the fact that he entered and exited the shop…”

I was getting to the crux of the topic, but she still showed no response as she merely lowered her head slightly. I felt more frustrated by the lack of response I got.

“You should have some reprint copies of ‘‘The Late Years’’. When you explained about the reprints to me, you said that you bought ‘a few copies’… you prepared two copies for this purpose, one to be displayed at the shop, and the book that was burned here. The book placed in the shop was just a flimsy fake, and even your sister and I could tell the difference… ’Kasai’ would definitely see through it, and your aim was to make him ask me where the real copy is. Of course, I trusted that man, and told him where the real one was. On the other hand, you deliberately made a disguise for the reprint edition you wanted to burn. You made the pages look old, and accurately imitated the words Dazai personally penned on the inside of the cover… since you had the original with you, it wouldn’t have been difficult to make it look the same once you had all the tools. It was evening back then, and we all thought that was the real copy because we couldn’t see clearly… after seeing the flimsy fake the last time around, the intricately faked reprint copy looked just like the real thing. You even used such a psychological effect, I suppose? Toshio Tanaka and I were fooled completely by you.”

I finished what I wanted to say in one go, and finally caught my breath. There should be no problems with my reasoning here; this real copy of ‘‘The Late Years’’ here is the most powerful proof.

Shinokawa, who remained still on the bed like stone, suddenly lowered her head at me. I could hear the teeny-weeny mosquito-like cry from here.

“…I am really sorry for lying to you like this…”

I looked away. Of course, I would be furious after being fooled this much, after being made use off so nonchalantly. However, there was another reason why I was furious; because she was important to me.

“Why must you do everything by yourself?”

I said.

“You should have told me the reason for protecting the real copy of ‘‘The Late Years’’ right from the beginning, and that ‘Kasai’ was weird. There was no need to make such a risk in the first place, right?”

5 days ago, if she had been careless, Shinokawa would have been stabbed by that man. If I had known about what happened, I could have lured ‘Kasai’ to the hospital more safely, and she could then burn the book. She planned such an elaborate trap, so why did she choose such a dangerous method? That was the aspect I was most infuriated by.

“That’s because…I thought you wouldn’t help me, Mr. Goura…”

She said hoarsely.

“Why do you think that way? Of course I would have assisted you, right?”

During this 1 month, I thought we were getting along well. She liked to talk about books, and I liked to hear about them. I thought there was something a little special between the two of us, and I at least trusted her.

“That’s because…you’re not someone who reads books…”

She uttered out those words with great difficulty.

“…I thought you may not be able to understand… the feeling of wanting to leave your favorite book with you no matter what you do. That’s because… it’s just a book to you.”

I was ostensibly struck by lightning at this point. I clearly stated that when we faced off against that man on the hospital roof—is there a need for you to go to this extent just for a mere book?

Those words hurt her. I could not say that I never had such thoughts ever since I started working here; after all, I was someone unable to get involved with books. I did not understand the feelings of someone who viewed books to be as important as their lives, and she clearly saw through this aspect.

“However, I thought I had no choice… but to not trust you…”

Her words seemed distant to me when I heard them, and I slowly stood up. My anger had dissipated completely; at this point, all that was left was the feeling to immediately get away from here. In the end, it was just me trying to to establish a continual relationship with her.

That might be a little difficult, because all bookworms like those that are similar to them.

So that was how it was, Grandmother.

I did not understand this person at all, and at the crucial moment, I was someone she could not trust.

“E-erm, I am… really sorry…”

“I’m resigning.”

“Eh!?”

She widened her eyes. This startled response however surprised me a little.

“I’m returning this to you.”

I forcefully stuffed the shop key that was entrusted to me into the palm of her hand, which rested on the blanket. And then, I took a large step back and put distance between us.

“Mr. Goura… e-erm, I still have things to talk…”

I ignored her panicked voice and lowered my head deeply. I did not want to hear her apologize any further, as it would dishearten me even further.

“I’m sorry to trouble you so much during this short time.”

Epilogue

I resigned from the *Biblia Antique Books* just like that. Afterwards, I went to the store for the last time to receive my remaining salary, but I never met Shinokawa even once since then.

My mother was most enraged when I went back to being unemployed.

"WHAT WERE YOU THINKING, RESIGNING AFTER WORKING FOR A SINGLE MONTH? YOU HAVEN'T EVEN WORKED ENOUGH TO DECIDE WHETHER THE JOB'S FINE OR NOT. FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE, AN UMEMPLOYED PERSON IS WORTH AS MUCH AS AN INSECT HERE, YOU KNOW? THOSE UNWILLING TO WORK WILL NOT GET TO EAT!"

She was telling me off me as much as she wanted, and seemed to feel that she might have said too much once she saw me looking all gloomy. Before she went to work the next day, she had left a note for me in the kitchen.

(You earned enough money to eat. Calm down and look for another job.)

I was bothered that she was able to say such legitimate things once in a while.

To be honest, I really could not explain why I resigned from this job. As a human being, what was I not being trusted on? The only appraisal I needed as a store attendant was through the salary I earned from my job. Basically, I asked her for a relationship beyond one between a storekeeper's and a store attendant's. I did not know whether love was a factor. In the end, the relationship between someone talking about books and someone listening about books could not be defined.

Anyway, I should not expect unreasonable things when dealing with other workers, especially those bespectacled beauties that were older. I kept this in mind as I started attending job seminars.

Anyway, two weeks' worth of time passed by peacefully. After writing an umpteenth number of resumes and attending briefings, I was finally about to have a final interview at a food company in Saitama. Maybe things would take a turn for the better. The moment I thought about that, the phone suddenly rang. Shinokawa's sister was the one calling. I hesitantly picked up the phone, and after a simple greeting...

"...How's the store doing?"

...I asked about what I was most concerned with. A store attendant suddenly resigning would definitely cause major inconveniences. However, she said in a pleasant mood:

"We closed the store for the time being until we get new workers. Ah, you don't have to worry too much, Goura. It was already hard to open the store when my sister's not at home."

Even though she said that, I still could not erase the guilt in me. Either way, the store being closed was a direct consequence of my resignation.

"Anyway, there's something more important I want to ask you."

Suddenly, her tone became serious.

"Did something happen between you and my sister, Mr. Goura?"

The hardest thing right now was to answer to that question. I could not explain properly what happened with *The Late Years*, and I could not even understand myself what happened with Shinokawa.

"Hum, well...it's a bit—"

"What do you mean it's a bit...did you touch those large breasts?"

"HOW CAN THAT BE POSSIBLE?"

"But her breasts are really big. They're well shaped too."

She was obviously teasing me. I was really dumbfounded that it still managed to prick my imagination.

"...I'm hanging up."

"Sorry, please hold on for a moment! My sister's had been acting weird recently."

"Eh?"

"She's not reading anymore."

I was at a loss of words. That person who would bring in lots of books into a bookstore? That person who would lie to everyone around her just to protect a single book? It was really hard to imagine.

"Ever since you resigned, Mr. Goura, she had been spacing out...she was finally discharged after waiting for so long, but she's feeling down, so I'm worried. Can't you pay a visit to her, even just once?"

In the end, I did not say whether I would go or not. I simply told her that I would consider for a while, and hung up the phone.

After that call, I could not get the thoughts concerning Shinokawa out of my mind for a certain period of time. I was really concerned that she was feeling down. Was it really because of me? Was that person bothered because of me?

At this point, I had no intention of visiting her. She clearly stated that she could not rely on me, and I could not talk to her as if nothing happened. Plus, it would be impossible for me to talk to quiet Shinokawa anyway—but I was worried that she was feeling down.

And just like that, I ended up caught within the loop of my thoughts, and several days had passed before I knew it. I attended the final interview with the food company with Saitama. I felt fine about my performance, but I was tired out of a sudden when I reached Ofuna.

I walked to the ticket gate in the Ofuna station, walked down the stairs and stepped onto the main road. We were still having an Indian summer, and the remaining lights of sunset seemed like they were piercing through my jacket's sleeves. But at least it was now technically autumn.

I walked down the avenue and saw the frontmost white building, the Ofuna General Hospital. The visiting period probably had not ended yet.

(...Should I really go?)

As expected, I was still worried about Shinokawa. However, it was too late today. It might be better to go tomorrow. No, since I decided to go today—

"...Erm."

A soft voice came from a bench on the pedestrian pathway. After I continued to walk for two, three steps, I suddenly looked back in shock.

A bespectacled, long-haired woman was sitting on the bench. She was wearing a bright checkered skirt and a plain shirt, while being covered by a knitted cardigan. It was the same plain outfit she wore when I met her a few years ago—speaking of which, this was the second time I met her in this outfit beside when she used them as pyjamas.

"Shinokawa ...what are you doing here?"

"I-I got...discharged today..."

She muttered as she used the two crutches to help her stand up. The sturdy crutches were structured for her to put her elbows on. I wanted to reach out to help her at that instant, but she shook her head shyly and straightened her waist to stand properly. I heard that she was going to be discharged, but I never expected her to recover so well.

"...I thought that you would probably...pass by here."

I felt my body temperature rise. It seemed that she waited on this bench for me for a long time, and we just stayed standing there, several steps away from each other.

"Congratulations on your discharge."

This was the only thing that I could say.

"...Thank you very much."

She lowered her head as she said that. Both of us remained silent as we did not know how to carry on the conversation. Why did she come to see me?

"Did something happen?"

I tried to prompt the conversation. She leant on the crutch in her right hand to support her body, and handed the tote bag on her left side to me.

"...T-This."

"What?"

"Please help me take care of this."

I took it doubtfully, checked the contents of the bag—then widened my eyes. There was a book inside: the *The Late Years* from before. Dazai's signature was inside the cover, and it looked the real thing no matter what.

"W-Why *this*?"

"W-Well, I would like you to...help me keep it, please."

I really could not understand. Was this not the old book she wanted to keep in her possession even if she had to lie to the people around her? Did she not treasure it more than anything else?

"Erm...I want to try relying on you, I guess..."

She squeezed out these words as she blushed—so that was how it was. I understood. She would put the book she treasured most in my hands as the proof of her faith in me. In other words, this would be the method of reconciliation she was proposing. Well, it was just like this person to hand a book worth several hundred million yen to me like that.

I could not help but laugh. In this case, the first one laughing loses. In any case, her feelings have reached me, and just that was well enough.

"I don't want this."

I put the book back into the bag and hung it on Shinokawa's wrist. Her expression looked somewhat stiff, so I hurriedly said:

"It would be pointless for me to have this when I can't read, so it's better to leave it with you, Shinokawa… well, if I ever want to hold on to it, I'll tell you at that time. Rather than that…"

I straightened my back and faced her.

"Shouldn't it be about time to fulfill that promise?"

"…that promise?"

She tilted her head doubtfully.

"You said that you would describe the contents of *The Late Years*, didn't you…did you forget our promise?"

Her face immediately burst into a beaming smile, and she looked like she changed into a completely different person, making it hard for me to not look at her.

"Sure. Please sit here."

She briskly changed her tone and invited me to sit on the bench. Did she want to tell me about this story immediately? I felt that it was kind of weird, but of course, I had no reason to refuse. I kept a little distance from her as I sat down, and the distance just so happened to be the length of that volume of *The Late Years*. However, she closed her distance and leaned over to me slightly.

I could feel her warmth from where our bodies are in contact, causing the left half of my body to stiffen. I wondered what if she said that she hoped for me to return to the store with her after listening to her story about *The Late Years*? Somehow, it seemed that I could find a steady job.

Anyway, let's forget about this for now. I should just listen to her story first.

She looked over at me just like this, and suddenly changed her tone as she started talking.

"I think I said it before that the "Late Years" was an Osamu Dazai's maiden work published during the 11th year of the Shōwa period. At that time, Dazai was in his twenties, and it was said that he spent ten years on this work and wrote more than 5,000 pieces of manuscripts. The recorded works were just a small fraction…"

Afterword

Whenever I get off at an unfamiliar stop, I will often look for an antiquarian bookshop if time permits.

Once I find a signboard at the end of a shopping street or a crossing, I will randomly enter one, and then look up at the bookshelves that reach the ceiling.

I like the atmosphere unique only to old books, something newly published books lack. It feels like there is a thin membrane applied on them after they are passed down people's hands—though of course, I really like the hard yet thin texture of newly printed pages.

There are vastly different treatments of books; amongst those are some who keep their books in neat condition, some who have the habit of using bookmarks, and some who have the habit of removing the wrapper. When reading through old books, my interests are not simply the contents of the books themselves, but also what kind of persons the previous owners were.

I did not know when it started, but I thought of writing a story involving old books. I set Kita-Kamakura as the stage because this peaceful land was similar to the ideal setting I wanted to write a long time ago.

On a side note, when writing this afterword, there is no antiquarian bookshop around the Kita-Kamakura station (as far as I know). Thus, there was no clear model behind the shop the protagonists work at, and I thought of it in my mind. I wrote this story with the idea that if this kind of shop were available during my High School years, I would definitely be a regular customer here.

However, the old books appearing in this work are real. These are all books I love, books I have memories of. I hope to write a story that can end up becoming like these books.

To all people involved in the making of this book, and to all who read on till this afterword, I humbly thank you.

En Mikami

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Notes

1. ↑ In actual fact, it is more like a Buddhist temple. Built in 1929, this temple is 25m tall. More details on Guanyin in the next point. Here is a picture of it [1]
2. ↑ Note, in Japanese, they call Guanyin as Byakuekannon, 白衣観音, literally, white-clothed Guanyin. In Buddhism, this religious figure is the Bodhisattiva, or enlightened being of compassion, and is also revered by Taoists. The name, when translated, means 'The One who observes the sounds (of the world)'. A prominent god in East Asian religions. Commonly referred to as female nowadays, but was sometimes deemed a male in the past
3. ↑ Judo rankings. Looking at how Daisuke got a Dan at least, that will mean that he is ranked at least a blackbelt
4. ↑ Popular Buddhist temple. Informal name of Heiken-ji, 平間寺
5. ↑ Published in 1905-1906 as novel, this story is a satire about how Japanese society was undergoing reforms and aping Western customs
6. ↑ Highly popular in Japan, Botchan (or translated as Master Darling) is a story that revolves around morality.
7. ↑ 暴走族. Pretty much the biker gangs. Think Shonan Junai Gumi.
8. ↑ Goura's given name was 大輔, while the name of the protagonist was 代助
9. ↑ Yokohama International Christian Academy
10. ↑ The Japanese government's Employment Service Center
11. ↑ Japan Self-Defense Force
12. ↑ It's the story of a drug addict, the world revolving around her, and delves into the psychological aspects of addiction.
13. ↑ TN: The original has it as sedori, 背取り (せどり), which would mean ‘spine taker or withdrawer’. ‘Spine taker’ would mean that the seller would take (取り)the book by its spine, 背表紙 (せびょうし). In other words, ‘spine taker’ would mean ‘taking the book by the spine’. Obviously, that does not fit in as well in English, so I changed the text.
14. ↑ The temple that would best fit this description would be the Kōmyō-ji, a Buddhist temple. Incidentally, Shida would have passed through a place called Yuigahama (notable because the names of the cast in Oregairu are based on locations in Kanagawa; Yuigahama, Yukinoshita, Komachi and Zaimokuza are based in Kamakura, for example).
15. ↑ The road leading to a Shinto shrine or a Buddhist temple. In this case, it is a Buddhist temple.
16. ↑ A lucky cat (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maneki-neko) is a ceramic cat statue placed at the front of many shops and restaurants. It often has a raised paw that waves around. Shinokawa has her hand raised in a similar fashion.
17. ↑ Unlike the given name, this is actually a pretty grim story that talks about a lawyer’s failure to save a wrongly convicted person in a case of accused rape. Notably, the lawyer is the only morally upright party in the story.
18. ↑ Here's a reference. By the way, the length of the cord is 21cm.
19. ↑ In case you’re wondering, this isn’t the story adapted into the American drama.
20. ↑ 日本思想大系, Nihonshisōtaikei, a series of 67 books from Iwanami Shoten (the same publisher as the Sōseki's Complete Collection in Chapter 1).
21. ↑ Soviet Workers
22. ↑ Collective farmers under the unique Soviet farming system
23. ↑ To those who read the 'Book Girl' series, the first volume 'Suicidal Mime' was based on his work 'No Longer Human'
24. ↑ Japanese textile used either for gift wrapping or for polishing during a tea ceremony.
25. ↑ http://www.kamakurabungaku.com/
26. ↑ Note that this story was written in 2010. Osamu Dazai was born in 190
27. ↑ Also used as the protagonist in 'No Longer Human'
28. ↑ Original has it shortened to ほるぷ. Acronym is HOLP. As its name imply, the objective of this publishing group is to promote reading, either local works, or translated foreign works. Website: http://www.holp-pub.co.jp/

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